Chapter One
Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, around 1820, a farm servant named Ghasidas initiated a new sect primarily among the Chamars (traditionally, leather workers) of Chhattisgarh, a large linguistic and cultural region in central India. Ghasidas was born into a family of Chamar farm servants in the late eighteenth century, possibly in the 1770s, in Girod in the northeast of Raipur district. The Chamars constituted a significant proportion—a little less than one sixth—of the population of Chhattisgarh. The members of the untouchable group either worked on their own land or were sharecroppers and farm servants; but the ritual association of the community with hides, leather, and carrion meant that collectively it carried the stigma of the death pollution of the sacred cow. The close connections between divine, social, and ritual hierarchies located the Chamars at the margins of the caste order, and excluded them from Hindu temples. Ghasidas is believed to have thrown the idols of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon onto a rubbish heap. The rejection of these deities and the authority of Brahman specialists of the sacred, of temples and the Hindu *puja* (worship) offered in them was accompanied by the call to believe only in a formless god, *satnam* (true name). The new sect was called Satnampanth and its members, Satnamis.

There were to be no distinctions of caste between Chamars and a few hundred members of other castes within Satnampanth. The Satnamis had

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

to abstain from meat, liquor, tobacco, certain vegetables—tomatoes, chilies, aubergines—and red pulses. They were prohibited the use of cows, as opposed to bullocks, in any of their agricultural operations and from ploughing after the midday meal. With Ghasidas began a guru *parampara* (tradition), which was hereditary. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Satnamis had fashioned an organizational hierarchy and developed a stock of myths, rituals, and practices that were associated in the main with the gurus and challenged the tenor of ritual power, upper-caste domination, and colonial authority in the region. Over the next hundred years the Satnamis coped within transformations in the agrarian social structure and the changing relations of power in the region, negotiated different efforts to regulate the internally differentiated community, and drew upon symbols of authority to question and contest their subordination. The community, which has combined the features of a caste and a sect, continues to be a significant presence in Chhattisgarh.

Analytical Overtures

This book constructs a history of the Satnamis, but it does not present the past as a mere unfolding of a chronologically sequential set of events. My story of Satnami endeavors, encounters, and experiences, with its inevitable subplots, is an interpretive exercise, an exercise in which the perspectives of history and anthropology are each inseparably bound to the other, where archival and nonofficial sources are read in an ethnographic mode and field work is cast as an engagement with the historical imagination. The account addresses a clutch of theoretical issues, a range of key and inextricably bound relationships between sect and caste, religion and power, myth and history, orality and writing, gender and order, community and hegemony, reform and authority, and resistance and domination. The arguments are woven into the larger tale, involving a dialogue between history and ethnography and an interplay of archival and field work.

Indeed, the book attempts to bring together the perspectives and possibilities defined by three overlapping but distinct theoretical developments that have all been elaborated in recent years: first, novel renderings of anthropologies and ethnographies of the historical imagination; second, critical constructions of histories from below, particularly by the collective *Subaltern Studies* endeavor; and, finally, a conceptual emphasis on the "everyday" as an arena for the production, negotiation, transaction, and contestation of meanings, often in a "local" and quotidian key, within wider networks and relationships of power. [1] By casting these analytical tendencies in an implicit critical dialogue with one another, my account works toward questioning

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

some of those overarching oppositions—for example, between ritual and rationality, myth and history, tradition and modernity, and community and state—that have formed the conceptual core of several of our inherited traditions of social and political theory within the academy in both Western and non-Western contexts. Far from the fashioning of a new nativism, the challenge to such grand oppositions—and the teleologies and determinations they engender—is actually a mode of resisting conceptual schemes that obfuscate the many imaginative pathways of human practice. There are many ragged but meaningful bridle paths of the past, and this book highlights the distinct perspectives and the practice (but also the problems and the predicaments) of ethnographic history, an interpretive endeavor that still remains a somewhat fledgling enterprise in the South Asian context. [2]

A key emphasis in this endeavor, it seems to me, consists of writing against the grain of those *ur* blueprints of history and meaning, often (but by no means solely) derived from Eurocentric imaginings, which specify the trajectories of the past and the present across cultures by orchestrating particular historical and ethnographic cases, cases that are in turn cast as irremediably narrow illustrative material whose entire purpose is to fit into and elaborate a predetermined larger pattern, grist to the mill of overarching theoretical frameworks. Moreover, an abiding irony reigns here, for even those "alternative" writings which range themselves against teleologies and "foundational" histories are not entirely immune to the seductive charms of a motor of grand theory running specific historical and ethnographic cases, and critiques of Eurocentric imaginings often run the danger of reproducing the givenness of categories derived from the very frameworks they set out to question.[3] Clearly, this is not a plea for the eschewing of theory. Rather, it is a call against the rendering of theory in the capital case that only paves the way for its further aggrandizement. A sustained mutual dialogue and the play of concept (and categories) with evidence (and the empirical), where the domain of facts and information is simultaneously bound to the less conscious realm of popular imaginations, theory needs to be interwoven into narrative as a critical interpretive act, a crucial aspect of the telling power of tales, in elaborations of ethnographic histories.

This brings up the question of the place of the "particular" in our ethnographies, histories, and ethnographic histories. Here, let me rehearse a passage by Michel de Certeau that evokes this issue, a statement whose wide resonances run throughout my work.

> For what I really wish to work out is a *science of singularity*; that is to say, a science of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. And only in the *local* network of labor and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio-economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly estab-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

lish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic). The characteristically subtle logic of these "ordinary" activities comes to light only in the details. [4]

In this book on the Satnamis, a critical reading of the "singularity" and the "details" of a particular historical and ethnographic case and the wider analytical implications and theoretical import of the study are not artificially separated one from the other. Rather, they are rendered as inseparable domains, which mutually fashion each other. This Introduction does not cast matters on a resolutely grand theoretical scale, characteristic of writings that turn theory into a touchstone of truth, but takes the path followed by the rest of the book.

Meanings and Margins of Hinduism

For long years now the very categories of "Hinduism" and "Hindu" have been variously debated, dissected, and defended by students of religion (s), historians, and anthropologists.[5] More recently, scholars of different persuasions from one another have taken up matters of philology, etymology, and taxonomy to argue that the category of Hinduism, and to a greater or lesser extent the realities it encodes, is a nineteenth-century creation of colonial imaginings.[6] As for the term *Hindu*, although of a much older vintage than *Hinduism*, it had originally an ethnogeographical reference (the people of the lands around and beyond the river Indus) that was retained in the form in which it entered the English language in the seventeenth century, and it was only gradually that Hindu came to mean someone who was indigenous to India but was not a Muslim (or a Christian).[7] *Hindu* as a term, the argument proceeds further, also seems to have been barely used by the people whose religious affiliation it purported to describe, since the very homogeneity of the category ran counter to the fabric of the "interpenetration and overlapping of communal identities," characteristic of the "highly localized" nature of religious formations in India, that continued well into the nineteenth century.[8] Thus, it was only in the nineteenth century that the categories of Hinduism and Hindu, in conjunction with each other, came to clearly specify an Indian's religious affiliation, and this involved a twin birth but a single conception, a conception that was largely Christian but far from immaculate because of its colonial implications. Indeed, the picture was complete when the English-educated, often middle-class, social reformers and nationalists in nineteenth-century India responded to such Western appraisals of Indian religions by undertaking a series of different steps toward constructing their vision and practice of Hindu and Hinduism,

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

blueprints that often tended to fashion homogeneous meanings and to reproduce the significance of colonial categories in their very articulation of difference from the West. [9] (Significantly, these blueprints came to be elaborated alongside the measures constructed by the imperial government with regard to religious communities.)

On the other side, historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion have emphasized (in both implicit and explicit ways) that, philological and etymological issues notwithstanding, far too much is "currently [being] made of the colonial construction of caste and religious categories and too little of the precolonial basis for these categories, on which the colonial state had its impact."[10] In brief, precolonial India was not devoid of supralocal identities, and these historically constructed identities, from the twelfth century onward, involved different renderings of a Hindu "self" and various constructions of a Muslim "other" in wider contexts of processes of state formation, the development of a royal cult of the god-king Ram as a political theology, and the fashioning of discursive, linguistic, and popular-devotional communities in several significant parts of the subcontinent.[11]

Taken together, these emphases suggest both the need to question the givenness of the categories of Hindu and Hinduism and the necessity to explore the ways in which the relationships and arrangements that came to be named and ordered by these categories had a basis in precolonial India. Yet the very design of this debate also involves a somewhat single preoccupation with the "origins" of categories, and a casting of the definitions of Hindu and Hinduism rather exclusively in relation to other religions. One of the ways of going beyond the terms of the debate at hand is to explore the diversities, differences, and discontinuities in the production of the many meanings of Hinduism, the construction of multiple Hindu identities as a negotiated and contested resource, particularly by groups and communities who stood on the margins of these religious categories.

Indeed, it is these margins, rendered here as a history of the Satnamis, that provide an important filter to examine the constitution of the meanings of Hinduism and the articulations of Hindu identities—fashionings and elaborations not merely of these words themselves, but of the wider structure of the lived beliefs and practices to which they refer—over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For when I write of Hindu and Hinduism in these pages, I allude to patterns and arrangements of lived religious meanings and practices, the everyday transactions of the different members and groups within the sacred universe of an Indic religion, where the social, ritual, and cosmic domains have been integrally bound one to the other. Indeed, a crucial aspect of these transactions of meanings and practices concerns the several elaborations, negotiations, and contestations of the intermeshing of divine, ritual, and social hierarchies, which have been cen-

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

tral to Hinduism. [12] I need to add here that mine is not a call for the jettisoning of sacred texts in constructing our understanding of Hindu religion, rather it is an argument for exploring the practices that underlie the construction, dissemination, apprehension, and appropriation of these texts, an emphasis that reveals processes of the canonization and of the radical reworkings of textual traditions by historically and politically situated interpretive communities within Hinduism. To be sure, this is neither a foolproof nor an exclusive definition of the categories in question, but in highlighting the issues of what Fuller has called "hierarchical inequality" and the "partial continuity between humanity and divinity"—both matters inflected by power—it foregrounds two interconnected aspects that are central to lived Hinduism.[13] In a related move, my emphasis on practices, processes, and power in our historical and ethnographic understanding of Hinduism allows us to treat it as a religion that has been variously constructed and contested in, through, and over time. Finally, my endorsement of the perspectives of margins, a history of an untouchable community, in discussing the historically constituted meanings of Hinduism and Hindu identities permits us to explore these issues as part of a wider dynamic between religion and power.

Clearly, religion is not treated here as a hermetically sealed-off domain of the sacred, a static repository of timeless traditions. Instead, it is understood as an inherently historical set of signifying beliefs and practices whose meaningful constructions—and active refiguring of perceptions—of the social world are at once tied to processes of domination and to strategies of resistance to authority. It follows that the processual character and the simultaneously symbolic and substantive nature of religion are closely linked to wider transformations in culture and society. Power in turn extends far beyond the exercise of authority grounded solely in control over political and economic resources to include manifest and diffuse processes of domination, hegemony, and control—cultural schemes, disciplinary regimes, and discursive practices—which inform everyday social relationships structured by the interlocking of different principles of social division. Now, if these inclusive working definitions set the stage for a discussion of the complex dynamic between religion and power among the Satnamis, there are important issues at stake here. This dynamic reveals the negotiated and interrogated, reworked and contested meanings of Hinduism and Hindu identities—powerful resources in the subterranean and self-conscious simulations of Satnami strategies and struggles—over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To take but two examples here. We explore issues of the formation and elaboration of Satnampanth, a subaltern religious endeavor that fashioned its distinct identity by questioning the ritual power embedded within caste and by constructing "otherness" within the Hindu social

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

order in the nineteenth century. Equally, a little later in the account, we also discuss novel renderings of Hindu identities by the Satnamis under the regime of caste associations, within the wider context of culturally constituted understandings of Hinduism by nationalists and social reformers, understandings that were elaborated alongside measures constructed by the colonial government in relation to religious communities between the 1920s and 1940s. Indeed, the perspectives drawn from untouchable pasts, the meanings gleaned from margins, raise several important questions for central themes in South Asian history and ethnography. It is to these critical issues and key problems that I now turn.

Formative Issues: Rethinking Sect, Caste, Power, Contest

The formation of Satnampanth was informed by the wider context of Maratha rule (1742–1854) in Chhattisgarh, and my analysis of the early making of this religious endeavor locates it within the broader processes of state formation and revenue practices in the region. In fact, my arguments here constitute a part of a larger analytical endeavor, an attempt to attend to the changes and continuities in the domain of political economy while elaborating the fluid but constant interplay between cultural schemes, social relationships, religious meanings, and ritual power. Turning to the issue at hand, during the past few years nuanced historical accounts of economic and social institutions and processes in Maratha polities have revised our understanding of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in India. The somewhat crude sketch of Maratha rule as a predatory empire of the saddle has been replaced by a more finely drawn picture that shows significant continuities between the Mughals and the Marathas, an expansion in cultivation in Maratha territories, and the crucial place of local expectations and resistance in the shaping of Maratha administration. [14] Chhattisgarh as a frontier province within the Maratha dominions shared features of this wider picture. The region also had its own peculiarities. The administrative measures of British superintendents—who governed Chhattisgarh between 1818 and 1830 when the Bhonsle raja Raghoji III was a minor—compounded these complexities. Satnampanth was a response to cultural and economic processes that had a contradictory dimension for the Chamars in the region. These processes allowed members of the group to establish their own villages and thereby to negotiate and partly escape the authority of upper-caste officials. But they also led to an increasing subordination and further marginalization of other Chamars in villages dominated by higher castes in the face of a growing rigidity of the norms of purity and pollution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. My account

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

of the formation of Satnampanth, while providing a filter to examine wider arguments about processes of continuity and change in the period at the frontier of Maratha polity and the East India Company's dominions, highlights the centrality of conflict and innovation in the arena of popular religious practices. It explores the symbolic construction of a subordinate religious initiative that carved for itself a distinct religious identity in relation to the ritual power of the social and divine hierarchies within the caste order in Chhattisgarh, an endeavor that worked toward reconstituting the ascribed untouchable status of Chamars by incorporating them as Satnamis.

Sect and caste generally tend to be conceived of as binary categories, a legacy of Louis Dumont's theory of asceticism in Hindu society that rests on a set of homologous oppositions between caste and sect, Brahman and renouncer, man-in-the-world and individual-outside-the-world, and householder and ascetic. [15] This influential model, based upon a Brahman householder's construction of renunciation and asceticism, ignores the fact that sects do not necessarily recognize the householder/renouncer opposition and adopt different approaches—from total rejection to varying forms of acceptance—toward rules of caste.[16] Now, these differences cannot be explained away through Dumont's physiological analogies of Brahmans "absorbing" renouncers and sects "degenerating" into castes.[17] Both, Richard Burghart's short but elegant formulation of the perspective of a set of nonhouseholding ascetics, the Ramanandis of Janakpur, who believed in caste rules of commensality within the sect, and Peter Van der Veer's detailed and sensitive account of the processes of "sedentarization," accompanied by a strong emphasis on the social origins of the ascetic, among the "open category" of renouncers of the Ramanandi monastic order of Ayodhya, provide a case in point here.[18] Indeed, Dumont's conception of caste and sect, householder and renouncer, ignores the perspectives of the ascetic and the non-twice-born caste.

Against the grain of Dumont's overarching oppositions, the career of Satnampanth, a sectarian formation that has elaborated the perspectives of a non-twice-born caste, underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse articulations and permeable boundaries of caste and sect, householder and ascetic in South Asian religious traditions. From the moment of its inception, at each step, Satnampanth has been governed by a logic avowedly committed to reconstituting the overwhelmingly untouchable caste status of its exclusively householder members. This has involved the forging of a particular set of relationships between principles of sect and caste within the subaltern religious endeavor. Thus, the symbolic constitution of Satnampanth as a sect in the first half of the nineteenth century involved both reworkings of the beliefs, symbols, and practices of popular sectarian traditions such as Kabirpanth that had posed alternatives to the hierarchies

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

of caste and the appropriation of a set of focal signs from the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution embedded within the caste order. At work here were two simultaneous movements: a rejection of Hindu gods and goddesses and of the *purohit* and *puja* within temples, involving an interrogation of the close connections between divine, ritual, and social hierarchies; and the creation of Satnampanth as a pure body through its accent on the appropriation of signs of ritual purity, which removed the impurities of the bodies of its members. It is hardly surprising that these seemingly contradictory moves worked together to question the ritual subordination of Satnamis, since the twin articulations were governed by a single logic that was made up of a fusion of the codes of caste and sect. As we shall see, to be and to become a member of Satnampanth involved both the initiation into a sect and the incorporation within a caste. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, the elaboration of an organizational hierarchy within Satnampanth, with the guru at its head, further clarified this pattern. Indeed, the fashioning of the figure of the Satnami guru constructed new meanings of asceticism: the guru, ever the householder, came to combine within himself the truth and purity of *satnam*—through a rejection of the integrally bound hierarchies closely connected to the Hindu pantheon and the creation of Satnampanth as a pure body—together with the attributes of a *raja admi* (kingly person)—derived from schemes of ritually fashioned kingship within the caste order—to become the living symbol of worship within the Satnami community. The guru and the Satnami organizational hierarchy enforced the norms and practices, an amalgamation of the principles of sect and caste, that maintained the boundaries of Satnampanth. All this provides a forceful reminder to reconsider the relationships between caste and sect, householder and ascetic, developed by Dumont and later deemed a dominant design in the scholarship on South Asia. At the same time, these principles governing the forms of organization, norms, and practices within Satnampanth also set limits to the group's challenge to caste society: Satnampanth not only rejected and reworked, but it also reproduced the significance of meanings embedded within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and ritually fashioned kingship.

This brings to the fore questions of the wider interplay between religion and power in caste society in South Asia. Louis Dumont has argued that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution is the overarching organizing principle, the underlying structural logic, of caste within the Hindu social order. **19** In recent years, we have had forceful critiques of Dumont's exclusive preoccupation with a normative order presided over by the Brahman and defined by purity and pollution. The emphasis on "the complex and conjectural foundations of hierarchical relations" and the "several contextually shifting relations of intercaste relationships apparent in everyday

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

village social life" has focused on the ideological, religious, and cultural character of kingship and the dominant caste. [20] Actually, the debate underscores the issue of power in the caste order. The influential work of Dumont encompasses power within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, and renders it epiphenomenal.[21] The writings of Nicholas Dirks, Gloria Raheja, and Declan Quigley in turn open up possibilities for discussions of the intermeshing of caste structure, ritual form, and cultural attributes of dominance, but tend to locate power, almost exclusively, in constructs of ritually and culturally constituted kingship and dominant caste. In the end, these positions—an exclusive emphasis on the hierarchical concerns of purity and pollution, which brackets power from religion; and an embedding of caste within the political context of a culturally central, ritually fashioned kingship and dominant caste—seem to be mirror images.[22]

A history of the Satnamis constructed in the ethnographic grain suggests a different perspective on the nature of power in caste society in South Asia. The low ritual status of the group and its exclusion from the web of relationships defined by service castes—including the barber, the washerman, the grazier—in village life underscores that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the principles of a ritually central kingship and dominant caste were not separate and opposed principles but rather the two constituted intertwined cultural schemes, both charged with meanings grounded in relationships of power within the caste order. These distinct but overlapping schemes of ritual power worked together and reinforced each other in the definition of the subordination of the Satnamis and other untouchable communities. The formal establishment of colonial rule in Chhattisgarh in 1854 compounded these patterns of authority—a process, I would venture to suggest, also enacted with somewhat different emphases, over slightly altered time frames, in other parts of India. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idioms and practices of governance of the colonial order were critical in structuring the forms of dominance and power within caste society in South Asia. This was not a mere matter of the articulation of caste "movements" and identities, often (but by no means only) in the domain of institutionalized politics defined by the colonial administration. At work here were rather more complex and diffuse processes involving novel elaborations of hierarchies of power and fresh renderings of rituals of dominance, which drew upon aspects of colonial governance, in the constitution of caste in village relationships and local arenas.

Now this issue too has generally tended to be ignored by the main protagonists in the debate about the nature of power in the caste order, which is possibly in keeping with their emphasis on constructing a synthetic theory of caste in order to reveal the *internal* logic of the Hindu social order. Of the different arguments rehearsed above, only Nicholas Dirks directly

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

addresses the question of the links between caste and colonialism to argue that under colonial rule the embedding of caste in kingship lost its essential moorings in power, a characteristic of precolonial India. What was left in its place was a panoply of royal ritual devoid of power, a "hollow crown." [23] As a result, the masterful ethnohistory of a "little kingdom" produced by Nicholas Dirks accords little importance to the reworkings of colonial governance in local arenas, and his argument moves in a rather different direction from my focus on the symbols, metaphors, and practices of colonial rule as reinforcing and constituting the forms of power in the caste order. Indeed, Satnami oral narratives about village life in the colonial period elaborate how the constitution of authority within caste society, ordered by the metaphor of *gaonthia zamana* (the era of landlords), involved an intermeshing of the closely bound axes of dominance of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and ritually fashioned kingship with the forms of power derived from the colonial order. Once again, historical margins reveal the need to rethink central theories of the relationship between caste and power in South Asia.

And what of arguments extending Dumont's position about a cultural consensus centering on purity and pollution within the Hindu social order to untouchable castes? I shall focus here on the most detailed account, Michael Moffatt's study of the untouchables of Endavur in Tamil Nadu, south India. Moffatt argues that the untouchables, a "discrete set of low castes," who are excluded for reasons of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher human and divine beings, are also included in other relations with the same higher beings. The untouchables, in contexts of inclusion, complement higher beings by playing their appropriate low roles that are necessary for the maintenance of the human and divine order. Moreover, the consensus extends to situations of exclusion: the untouchables replicate and recreate among themselves the set of ranked relations of which they do not form a part.[24] My account shares Moffatt's concern to situate the untouchable castes within the broader set of cultural continuities in the caste system. However, it also highlights aspects of the pasts of the Satnamis that question the universal cast and the rigid form of the overarching oppositions underlying Moffatt's tidy picture of the principles governing untouchable communities.

To begin with, the Satnamis refused the "complementarity" of their position as lowly untouchables. As we have noted, the former Chamars, regrouped as members of Satnampanth, stopped accepting substances of death pollution of a higher being (the cow) from upper castes, and they also rejected the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and the close connection between divine and social hierarchies, all of which had defined the low ritual status of the group within caste society. Yet such redrawings of

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

the boundaries of Satnampanth also reworked—not, as Moffatt would have it, merely "replicated"—the symbols and practices of the cultural schemes of the caste order. Now these acts of refashioning on the part of the Satnamis followed varied paths. The group drew upon the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution in ways that may seem—at certain points, and in some readings—to be consonant with the logical patterns of replication established by Moffatt: but these acts of appropriation were conjoined with novel fashionings of the cultural and ritual attributes of kingship, a distinct scheme of authority within the caste order, and with fresh renderings of elements of popular traditions, traditions tied in turn to contestations of the interlocking hierarchies of caste. These reworked signs, drawn from different traditions but now situated next to each other within the matrix of Satnampanth, pressed new associations and critical meanings, and together they interrogated and challenged the low ritual status of the Satnamis.

Of course, it can be argued that the Satnamis—and indeed other related examples—provide an exception which in fact proves the general rule of Moffatt's arguments concerning the principles that govern untouchable communities. But this would be to ignore at least two critical analytical issues, quite apart from the sheer weight of empirical evidence about untouchable groups that militates against Moffatt's scheme. [25] First, in our analyses of social practice, as Bakhtin has argued in relation to linguistic and discursive performance, "the task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity."[26] Second, these processes of the production of meanings occur within cultural fields defined by relationships of power, and the meanings constituted within social practices variously elaborate, negotiate, and subvert cultural *forms* that are tied in different ways to schemes of dominance and authority.[27] These twin perspectives clarify that Moffatt's model dwells on the identities of forms of ranked relations within the caste order that extend to the untouchable castes, but it accords little importance to the production of meanings involved in the appropriation and reappropriation of these forms by different castes, in this case by the untouchables of Endavur. A second general problem follows from the first. Moffatt's sharp distinction between "consensus" and "disjunction" also stands in the way of analyses of the construction of nuanced meanings of consensus and of elaborations of the disjunctive aspects of replication within the hierarchies of caste, the more so because his account, following Dumont, ignores the principles of power that are structured into the cultural schemes of caste society.

The Satnamis negotiated and contested these relations of power through a variety of cultural and ritual means in the nineteenth and twenti-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

eth centuries, and my analyses here seek to overcome what Sherry Ortner has identified as the "problem[s] of ethnographic refusal"—the severe lack of an ethnographic perspective—in the recent spate of studies of "resistance." [28] We have seen that the creation of Satnampanth initiated the challenge to ritual power within caste society in Chhattisgarh. In the last four decades of the nineteenth century, the Satnamis responded to their expropriation and exploitation under the new system of proprietary rights and *malguzari* (village proprietor) settlement, established by the colonial regime in the 1860s, with various strategies: they deserted villages, continued with the practice of *lakhabata*—the periodic redistribution of land—in Satnami villages, and their solidarity was evident in the challenge to upper-caste *malguzars* over the issues of rent and loss of land in the 1890s. The enduring and persistent contestatory practices of the Satnamis were rooted in the domain of the familiar and the everyday. The organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth, presided over by the guru who combined the twin, inextricably bound characteristics of the raja and the embodiment of the truth of *satnam* served as an alternative ritual and symbolic power center to dominant groups and their network of relationships with service castes. Over the nineteenth century, the group also fashioned modes of worship that combined an accommodation of the beliefs and festivals shared by the village with the creation of new divinities, which challenged the tenor of upper-caste Hinduism. The Satnamis developed a repertoire of myths, a part of their oral tradition, which centered on the gurus. The myths drew upon and questioned the relations of power constituted by the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, the cultural construct of kingship and dominant caste, and colonial authority within Chhattisgarh. Finally, in the midst of efforts (aided by upper-caste benefactors) to recast the identity of the Satnamis along the lines of recently constructed authoritative blueprints of Hinduism in the 1920s and 1930s, the group fashioned distinctive uses for the key emphases of the Hinduisms that were on offer, and its reworkings of Hindu identities were accompanied by a challenge to the upper castes. The Satnami criticism of domination, with its accent on the refiguring of the perceptions of the social world through ritual forms and mythic meanings, reveals the challenge to authority in a religious idiom, between the violent drama of rebellion and ordinary acts of daily subterfuge.[29]

Reworked Resources: Myths, Orality, Writing, Histories

The myths of Satnampanth, marked by a high degree of symbolic elaboration, were a part of the ongoing oral traditions of the community. They suggest the need to explore the relationship between myth and representa-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

tions of the past. Now the counterposing of history and myth as opposing categories reinforces the distinction between societies with a dynamic past and other people with unchanging mythic orders. [30] Indeed, this distinction is itself a part of a wider set of overarching oppositions—homologous to each other but articulated in various and often selective ways—between modernity and magicality, rationality and ritual, West and East, reason and emotion, and culture and nature. I repeat this truism because these oppositions and the meanings they engender are not mere specters from the past, now exorcised by a radical ethnographic will. They remain a persistent and palpable presence, a part of our here and now, within and outside the academy, in Western and non-Western contexts, their insidious influence exercising its enchantments over a wide spectrum of political and intellectual opinion from conservative think tanks, to mainstream liberals, to left ideologues, to strains of postcolonial radical and primitivist alternatives.

Clearly, we need to rethink these oppositions, and I take a small step in this direction here. First, myth can be a form of the ordering of historical consciousness and can embody specific cultural conceptions of the past. Moreover, the stratification of myth and ritual in temporally layered religious cults and movements underscores the importance of attending to the internal order and the structure of meanings of myths and rituals to elucidate the development of a mythic tradition.[31] My reading of Satnami myths combines these emphases and concerns. The myths ordered the past of Satnampanth. The Satnami gurus underwent trials, overcame obstacles, and negotiated and displaced figures of authority to define the boundary and orchestrate the symbolic construction of Satnampanth. The retelling of the myths in the performance of oral traditions reaffirmed the identity of the Satnamis as a bounded group, a community. Satnami myths allow us to trace, at once, the group's cultural conception of its past, and the creation of a new mythic tradition.

The Satnamis' telling of stories from their past, without the devices of literacy, invited those who stood outside the community—with manifest interests in the group—to intervene with written histories. It is, of course, difficult to sustain a view that writing and orality are entirely exclusive forms that exist independent of each other. The two forms constitute overlapping but distinct discursive modes, each with its own devices and ways of ordering the world.[32] This book explores the complex cultural encounter between orality and writing embedded in the Satnami past. The writing down of Satnami myths by Baba Ramchandra, an upper-caste outsider and former peasant leader of the radical Kisan Sabha movement of 1918–1920 in the Awadh countryside in north India, in a curious manuscript called *Ghasidasji ki Vanshavali* (the genealogy of Ghasidas) in the 1920s remained bound within the logic of orality. Even as Ramchandra sought to frame a continu-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

ously performed oral tradition in writing in the *Vanshavali,* the devices of literacy could not compromise the internal order of myth, and the written text actually derived its meaning from oral and mythic categories. Moreover, the writing of such outsiders came to define the contours of Satnami initiatives, and a key effort to reform and control the community and to redefine Satnami identity in the 1920s was conducted in an idiom of law and authority that was embedded within writing. The critical place of writing as an instrument of domination, in fact, meant that the Satnamis both contested and appropriated its symbolic and substantive power. Finally, the Satnami encounter with evangelical missionaries, which began in 1868, was marked by an interplay and interpenetration of oral narratives and written texts that produced a reordered past of Satnampanth. The Satnami converts to Christianity reworked their oral traditions and the "truth" learned from their evangelical benefactors to forge connections between Ghasidas and the gurus and Christ and the missionaries; the missionaries in turn seized upon these oral traditions to fashion alternative histories, contending pasts. The two processes fed each other. In the 1930s the pooled resources of orality and writing, of the converts and missionaries, resulted in an "authoritative" account of Satnampanth, an account that tried to link the Panth to the inexorable logic of the "truth" of Christ and formed a missionary's last bid to secure a metamorphosis of the Satnamis through their "witnessing" of the Savior. The short text, written by the missionary M. M. Paul, simultaneously took up the forms and idioms of popular religious discourse and followed modes of inscription that lent fixity to its allusions and tenor. This endeavor once again underscored the retention, subversion, and fashioning of meanings that lay at the heart of the relationship between orality and writing.

These processes involving the constitution of truths and the making of histories were a part of larger efforts to regulate the community and redefine its identity. The missionary M. M. Paul's narrative, which sought to string together speech and scripture, had its rivals. In the late 1920s Baba Ramchandra toyed with and then abandoned the myths he had so assiduously inscribed only a little earlier in the manuscript *Ghasidasji ki Vanshavali*. Instead, his *Satnam Sagar* staged an elaborate textual drama replete with the mysteries of classical cosmology, Brahmanical beliefs, and Vedantic vision. Its main protagonists were Hindu gods, goddesses, saints, and warriors, who now populated an esoteric and reified textual universe. The Satnami gurus put in a cameo appearance. The redemption of the Satnamis lay in following path of the Vedas. Only a few years later, the Shri Path Pradarshak Sabha, a Satnami initiative to reform the community and to persuade the provincial administration to enter the group as Hindus rather than Harijans in official records, mapped a genealogy that re-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

worked the origins of the group. It drew upon the laws of Manu, that ancient codifier of caste, only to turn them upon their head, and also worked on other popular and esoteric, oral and textual traditions to construct a novel past of the Satnamis. These contending accounts, premised upon a recognition of the significance of their past for the members of the community, seized upon history as a negotiable and reworkable resource in their bid to transform the Satnamis.

Colonial Modernities and Evangelical Encounters

Far too frequently, historical accounts, drawing upon classical social and political theory, set up an overriding opposition between state and community. This problem characterizes a great deal of the influential new scholarship on modern Indian social history, a difficulty, as we shall see, that extends from the earlier constructions of the pasts of subordinate groups in *Subaltern Studies* to the more recent shift within this series toward discussions of the dynamics of power and the discursive agendas—or, to put the matter (only) slightly differently, an interrogation of the histories—of the state and the nation in South Asia. [33] Here, even those exercises that actually discuss the fashionings of a colonial modernity in India often retain the givenness of a binary divide between state and community in their elaboration of the play of difference in the articulation of civil society with the colonial state.[34] Now this opposition between state and community tends to ignore the different ways in which the symbols and metaphors of the state and governance are drawn upon and imbricrate themselves in the construction of communities, particularly in their fashionings of notions of order, legalities, and identities. Let me clarify that this is no mere trendy poltergeist of Foucault's illuminating but spooky rendering of "governmentality," although I cannot deny having learned something from the category in an idiosyncratic manner.[35] At stake here rather is the crucial importance of a working recognition, at once a theoretical need and an empirical necessity, of the interplay and interpenetration between symbols of state and forms of communities in the making of colonial modernities.

Illiteracy among the Satnamis, we have noted, provided political opportunities for mediations of change by those empowered by writing. These players often engaged with the provincial government, and the symbols, metaphors, and practices of colonial rule came to lie at the heart of efforts to remap Satnami identity and to reform the community. In the early 1920s, a set of influential members of Satnampanth got together with Sunderlal Sharma, a local upper-caste Hindu reformer, and G. A. Gavai, a leader of the depressed classes, to set up an organization called the Satnami

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Mahasabha. The Mahasabha was an effort to reform the Satnamis and to participate in the emergent organizational and constitutional politics within the region and in the Central Provinces. The interventions of outsiders were critical in the making of the initiatives sponsored by the organization. G. A. Gavai drafted a petition from the Satnami Mahasabha to the governor of Central Provinces that appropriated the demands of the Satnamis to the concerns and the vocabulary of the depressed classes, a provincial political constituency. The petition won its key demand—the government duly recognized the reconstitution of Chamars as Satnamis within Satnampanth and inscribed this on official papers—and has since come to be celebrated by the group as a charter of victory. But it also introduced tensions within the Satnami organizational endeavor. The reworking of Satnami identity in a language whose grammatical rules were defined by caste associations and the provincial government stood in an uneasy relationship with a reiteration of the beliefs and traditions of Satnampanth within the Mahasabha. Such simultaneous, often contradictory, movements continued to be played out in several other ways in the activities of this Satnami endeavor. Between 1926 and 1930, Baba Ramchandra—the chronicler of Satnami myths and Brahmanical pasts, whom we had encountered a little earlier—took the lead in shaping the Satnami Mahasabha. Under his leadership, the Mahasabha drew upon the signs and resources of the language of the law of colonial administration and situated them alongside the symbols and forms of authority within Satnampanth to fashion new religious legalities under the wider rubric of the "true law of Ghasidas," and the project of the reform of the Satnamis came to be cast in an idiom of order and command. The community in turn worked within the interstices of these relations of power, of intervention and appropriation, to fashion its vision and practice. Thus, the Satnami leaders of the Mahasabha acquired those figures of speech that enabled them to engage with the political institutions and processes defined by colonial administration, the reworked categories of colonial law and administrative organization became enduring features of these leaders' drive to discipline and control the community, and the group itself came to recognize the centrality of the new idioms of legality, authority, and governance within the community.

Clearly, the community here was not a homeostatic centerpiece of timeless tradition—or a terribly impoverished part of the "there and then" of a corrupt modernity—locked in mortal combat with an essentially alien colonial state. It follows that colonial modernity too had a chequered career, configured by the joint energies of the colonizers and the colonized. Indeed, the symbols and practices of imperial rule offered a pool of resources that were deployed in selective, diverse, and even conflicting ways by the Satnamis to redefine identities, construct traditions, fashion legali-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

ties, and define pathologies within the community, and to thus participate in the construction of a colonial modernity.

This pattern of appropriations and ambiguities extended to the cultural encounter between the Satnamis and evangelical missionaries. The evangelical encounter was located at a critical intersection of meaning and power: the engagement of the mission project with colonial cultures of rule; and the interface of Protestant theology, evangelical beliefs, and the practices of missionaries with the principles of caste and sect and the institutions and dynamics of village life. [36] The missionaries and the members of indigenous congregations were protagonists and players in dramas of differential perceptions and contradictory practices.

In 1868 the missionaries began a bid to transform the Satnamis that was to last a hundred years. The community did not see its destiny in Christ and proved elusive. The project of conversions among the group grew sluggishly, principally through ties of kinship. The Satnami converts carved out strategies of subsistence and fashioned their understanding of Christianity within the paternalist structure of the missionary enterprise. The missionaries in turn participated—as active agents and hapless victims—in the creation of an indigenous Christianity. The combined efforts of the missionaries and the leaders of the converts' communities led to the setting up of regulations that retained and modified the rules of Satnampanth and institutions of village life. The communities of Satnami converts to Christianity received these regulations through the filters of local cultures, persisted with earlier kinship practices, and reworked the Satnami oral traditions. The mission project's initiation of a set of key practices revolving around buildings, writing and the printed word, and clothing to civilize the converts also had unintended consequences: these signs and arts of civilization were imbricated in the reinforcement of the power of missionaries; and the converts fashioned their own uses for these cultural artifacts, including as instruments to question missionary authority. Once again, the project of modernity ushered in by the missionaries was shaped by the shared past of the evangelical entanglement.

Differentiating Community: Autonomy, Authority, Gender

It is a truism that the Satnamis functioned within relationships of domination, subordination, and resistance. Now the *Subaltern Studies* endeavor has made a powerful case for the recognition of the autonomy and agency of subordinate groups in the making of history, mainly through the substantive contributions made by the series to South Asian historiography, contributions that have developed an already well-established trend in the wider

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

writing of histories from below. [37] This emphasis has provided a valuable corrective to the tendency to appropriate the pasts of subordinate groups to overarching teleological schemes, although not all renderings of autonomy in the accounts constructed within *Subaltern Studies* have always entirely escaped the seductive charms of other teleologies.[38] At the same time, a preoccupation with autonomy tends to obscure the complex interdependence and interpenetration of agency, contestations, and domination and veers toward conceiving of subordinate groups and communities as homogeneous entities.[39] The Satnamis, at each step, functioned with schemes of symbolic representation that were charged with meanings grounded in hierarchy, authority, and power. These symbolic schemes circumscribed and limited Satnami practice, and the group followed evocative paths that drew upon the symbols of authority to cope with, negotiate, and challenge its subordination. This also meant that there was a reproduction of forms of domination within the internally differentiated community.

The differentials of property, office, and gender structured patterns of authority among the Satnamis. The power conferred by property was, in fact, intertwined with the propriety of office: Satnami *malguzars*, bound to the gurus' family through ties of kinship, occupied important positions within the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth. The members of the gurus' family and the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth sought out and settled disputes, established and enforced norms, and defined and punished transgressions to discipline and regulate the community. The mechanisms that questioned the subordination of Satnamis by dominant castes were also implicated in the exercise of control within the community. This became particularly clear—for instance, in the activities of the Satnami Mahasabha—when the authoritarian impulse of upper-caste interventions found a niche in the structures of authority within Satnampanth.

Gender played a critical role in the ordering and interplay of meaning and power among the Satnamis. Here some of the vast and impressive body of writing on gender in South Asia (and beyond) provides important insights for an implicit integration of questions of gender with other significant analytical issues and domains in history and anthropology.[40] The ideology and practice of kinship among the Satnamis valued the labor of women—even as they were denied entitlements to inheritance and firm rights in their natal and affinal homes—and afforded them a degree of flexibility in forming relationships of secondary marriages. This meant that Satnami women could strike bargains in gendered fields governed by patrilineal and patrivirilocal principles. At the same time, the high incidence of secondary marriages in the community combined with its low ritual status led upper-caste men with land and authority to turn their perceptions of the promiscuity and marginality of Satnami women into powerful instruments

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

of sexual exploitation. The upper-caste construction of the sexual laxity of Satnami women also had other roots. The ambiguities and tensions of gender extended to the rituals and myths of the group. This is particularly true of *jhanjeri chauka*, a ritual centering on fertility and the reproduction of the group, which was conducted after a Satnami woman did not bear a child even after long years of marriage and cohabitation with one or several men. In the ritual, enacted during the night in circumstances consistently described as dark and dangerous, all too resonant with liminality, the Satnami woman, in the aspect of a primal goddess, would choose the men of the community with whom she would have intercourse one after the other. Now, if *jhanjeri chauka* poses extremely difficult problems of interpretation, foregrounding issues of voyeurism that may well be inherent in ethnography, there are nonetheless at least two of its emphases that stand out, emphases that simultaneously elaborate two sides of wider cultural perceptions of women's double-edged sexuality. The ritual implicitly underscored men's responsibility for woman's "barrenness" to provide an important twist to the dominant conception of the respective roles of women and men in biological reproduction in patrilineal South Asia, but it also turned the Satnami woman's body into a site for the reinforcement of the solidarity of the men within the community and rendered her sexuality into an instrument for the reproduction of the group and its boundaries. Moreover, although the evidence on this issue is thin, Satnami women were sexually exploited by members of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth, which suggests that within the community ritual power was tied to sexual access to women's bodies. Finally, the principles of feminine sexuality governed the construction of women in Satnami myths, and the unbridled and untamed desire of wives of the gurus evoked disruption and disorder within Satnampanth.

It is hardly surprising that the evangelical missionaries in Chhattisgarh saw Satnami practices as an instance of the moral murk and sloth of the heathen world and sought to stamp out adultery and impose marriage as a sacred contract between individuals. If the Satnami converts flouted missionary authority and continued to form the "adulterous" relationships of secondary marriages legitimated by the principles of Satnampanth, they also drew upon missionary injunctions against adultery and reworked the rules of caste and sect to turn the honor of women into an evocative metaphor for order within the community and a symbol that constituted its boundary. The converts defied missionary logic in fashioning their understanding of marriage and sexual transgression. Similarly, an important initiative within the Satnami Mahasabha's effort to reform the community and redefine its identity also centered on a reordering of family, conjugal relations, and gender within the Satnami household. The play upon monogamy and the creed of woman's fidelity to the husband was a part of the larger

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

endeavor of the domestication of reform: the drive to control and dominate the diffuse domains of sexuality, nurture, production, and exchange in order to effectively exercise political and ritual power. Here too members of the community selectively appropriated and then waylaid these ambitious (en)gendered agendas. My account, instead of segregating gender, seeks to weave the category into the fabric of the Satnami past.

Beyond Caste Movements

For many years now we have had detailed accounts of caste associations and movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India. It is possible to distinguish three broad historiographical positions here. The first set of arguments suggested that in the articulation of caste and the political process, caste, the "natural association of traditional India," became a carrier of modernity in the realm of new institutionalized politics. [41] The second set held that caste associations came into being because of the development of communications—the growth of the press, railway networks, and towns as economic, educational, and administrative centers—and colonial administration. These processes involved self-interested patrons who conjured ideologies of caste unity and were essentially the "products of political opportunity."[42] Finally, studies of non-Brahman movements and initiatives of untouchable groups have revealed the limitations of these interpretations. The non-Brahman and untouchable initiatives played out the tensions and rivalries within indigenous society: religion was a mode of coping with, challenging, and, within limits, transforming an oppressive social order. The articulation of these initiatives and the forging of low-caste identities did not merely involve manipulation from above but engaged in a complex dialogue with the symbols, loyalties, and identities within popular traditions and local cultures.[43] Now, this history of an untouchable community shares the attention to the wide-ranging making of ideologies and the significance accorded to power and its contestations in the work on low-caste initiatives that challenged Brahmans and the caste hierarchy. Yet it also has different emphases from the existing literature on caste movements.

In writing about the Satnamis, I steer clear of framing the group's endeavors, encounters, and experiences as a "movement." An uncritical use of this category, even as a heuristic device, often carries dominant connotations of a preordained trajectory, a definite direction, and a determinate destination. Movements stand and fall by these yardsticks and those milestones, and the category lends fixity to fluidity and often forecloses the possibility of a recognition of the openendedness that may have inhered in the

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

past, particularly in the case at hand. This first general point brings up a second specific issue. Most studies of caste initiatives have tended to focus on the organization and leadership of movements, which in turn have left behind sets of well-defined written materials. This book bases itself on a variety of both written sources and oral testimonies to address a wide range of often-ignored critical questions over a much longer period than most studies of caste initiatives have tried to consider, and to thereby overcome the constraints imposed by the somewhat narrow dimensions of narratives of caste movements. [44] Finally, it follows that my account suggests the need to address a clutch of issues that have been incorporated in the writings on caste initiatives at best in fledgling ways: the crucial place of the play of idioms of authority (tied in turn to relationships of power within communities), agendas of gender, the making of colonial modernities, and the refraction of dominant interventions through the grid of local categories in the articulation of caste initiatives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In brief, to render the pasts of the Satnamis as a movement can detract from the task of constructing a history that seeks to unravel the finely textured and the roughly hewn fabric of the thoughts and practices of the group and to evoke the brilliant and the murky passions and energies of Satnami men and women over time.[45]

How Does the Garden Grow?

Having brought to a close the discussion of the different themes and strands that run through the book, here is a skeletal outline of the arrangement of its material and arguments, of the unfolding of the narrative. Chapter 2 discusses the making of Satnampanth in the wider context of processes of continuity and change and the administrative measures initiated by the Marathas and British superintendents in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries in Chhattisgarh. It highlights the critical place of innovation, the interpenetration of meanings, and resistance in the construction of the initiative of a subordinate group and in the domain of popular religious practices in the period. Chapter 3 locates the Satnamis within an altered agrarian structure defined by a new set of proprietary rights under colonial rule, explores the Satnami response and resistance to strategies forged by upper-caste landlords, traces the development of Satnampanth—by focusing on the place of the guru in the community, the elaboration of the organizational hierarchy of the sect, and the fashioning of the rituals, beliefs, divinities, and practices of the group—and discusses the evangelical encounter, between 1850 and 1900. Chapter 4 profiles the Satnamis within processes in the agrarian economy and village life in

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Chhattisgarh in the first half of the twentieth century. It discusses the forms of discrimination faced by the group—which involved an intermeshing of the principles of power structured into the cultural schemes of caste society with the symbols and practices of the colonial order—and explores the ordering of gender among the Satnamis by taking up questions of ritual, sexual exploitation, and kinship.

This discussion allows us to take up further interconnected issues. Chapter 5 examines Satnami myths that reveal the way the group ordered its past and underscore the symbolic construction of Satnampanth. The myths drew upon and questioned relationships of power within the region. But they also remapped cultural constructions of the intimate connections between feminine sexuality and male order. Chapter 6 focuses on the Satnami Mahasabha. Its efforts at the redefinition of the identity of the group were cast in an idiom and vocabulary of law and authority; the drive to reform the Satnamis brought into play an attempt to reorder conjugal relationships, gender, and the household within the community; dominant interventions were refracted through the filter of local categories; and the initiative negotiated the challenge of its rivals for the allegiance of the Satnamis in diverse ways. Chapter 7 discusses the construction of contending histories of Satnampanth that used the past of the group as malleable material to constitute novel truths. In the late 1920s Baba Ramchandra gave the community an official and canonical history that turned the Satnami gurus into bit players in an essentially Brahmanical drama. In the middle of the 1930s the Shri Path Pradarshak Sabha rehearsed and staged a novel drama centering on the origins of the group. At about the same time, the long history of the interface between orality and writing and the interplay of Satnami myths, convert tales, and missionary accounts resulted in the missionary M. M. Paul's authoritative inscription of a new and reordered past of Satnampanth. The making of these histories was a part of attempts to reform and regulate, transform and metamorphose the Satnamis, and also underscored the centrality of their past for the members of the community. The Conclusion draws out some of the wider implications of the account which stands at the intersection of history and anthropology.

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Chapter Two
The Making of Satnampanth, 1780–1850

The formation of Satnampanth in the early nineteenth century helped to forge a new identity for the Chamars of Chhattisgarh. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of change in the region. Cultivation expanded, the revenue demand of the state increased, and a Brahman-dominated bureaucracy replaced older structures of authority. The various administrative measures of the Marathas and British superintendents who governed the region in this period had contradictory economic and cultural consequences for the Chamars of Chhattisgarh. If certain members of the group established their own villages and successfully resisted the authority of upper-caste officials, other Chamars were pushed to the margins of village society and faced a growing rigidity of the norms of purity and pollution in the region. In this wider context Ghasidas, a farm servant, initiated Satnampanth. The sectarian endeavor at once drew upon popular traditions and the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, rejected the divine and social hierarchies that centered on the Hindu pantheon, and repositioned old signs in a new matrix. It questioned and challenged the ascribed status of Chamars as low untouchables who were tainted with the stigma of the death pollution of the sacred cow. The Chamars who joined the sect were cleansed of their impurity and marks of ritual subordination and reconstituted as Satnamis. At the same time, in the new sect the rejection of distinctions of caste among its Chamar and—

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

only a few hundred—Teli, Rawat, and higher-caste members was accompanied by prohibitions governing transactions with other castes. The main features of Satnampanth were sketched by the middle of the nineteenth century. [1]

Marathas, British Superintendents, and Chamars in Chhattisgarh

The large geographical and linguistic region of Chhattisgarh lies in southeastern Madhya Pradesh. It is popularly held that the region is so named because it once had *chhattis* (thirty-six) *garh* (forts), although another suggestion has it that Chhattisgarh is a corruption of Chedisgarh, the forts of the lord of Chedi.[2] Etymological issues aside, what is clear is that the term has been widely used only over the past two centuries. In basic topographic terms, the region is made up, on the one hand, of the large and fertile rice-producing Chhattisgarh plain measuring about 10,000 square miles, watered in the main by the Mahanadi, the Son, and the Seonath rivers, and on the other, of hilly tracts covered by forests.[3] The region remained relatively isolated until the nineteenth century. It is bound in the north by the Maikal range and merges into the forest hill areas of Bastar in the south. In the east the hilly (and until recently, heavily forested) areas separate Chhattisgarh from the old feudatory states of Orissa. The Satpura range marks off the region from the Wainganga valley in the west. The limited trade of Chhattisgarh—where imports far exceeded exports—passed through Mandla in the north, along the Mahanadi, through Cuttack to the east coast, and *banjaras* (pack traders) linked the region with Nagpur in the west and Bastar and Kanker in the south.[4]

Chhattisgarh has constituted a well-defined social field. The people here share linguistic ties. Chhattisgarhi, the vernacular of the region, is a dialect of the language group called Eastern Hindi.[5] It has also picked up elements of Sawari, Marathi, Oriya, and Telugu. The social composition of the population of Chhattisgarh plain consists of Hindu castes that include Brahmans, Rajputs, Kurmis, Rawats, Telis, Gandas, Chamars, Ghasias, and Mehtars, and tribal groups such as Gonds, Binjhwars, and Bhainas. Over several centuries different social groups migrated to Chhattisgarh, interacted with other castes and tribal communities within the confines of a relatively isolated region, and acquired distinctive characteristics. This involved the development of specific regional cultural attributes, including verbal and nonverbal folklore traditions and social institutions such as ritualized friendships, which often cut across social divisions.[6] It also meant that different castes worked in agriculture and, often, retained only a nominal association with their ascribed caste occupation.[7]

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

An account of the dim and distant antiquities of Chhattisgarh has little place here, but a brief discussion of the early political structure of the region will facilitate our understanding of the patterns and processes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that informed the making of Satnampanth. Until about 1000 C.E. the region, known as Dakshin (south) Kosala, was held by a succession of dynasties, including the Imperial Guptas in the fourth century C.E. At the same time, C. U. Wills has argued that throughout this period the internal political order of the region was characterized by a hierarchical political structure based on tribal clans, which controlled their own small kingdoms. [8] A chief had direct control over only a part of his immediate territory and the rest of the kingdom was controlled by members of the clan.[9] In about 1000 C.E. the region was conquered by the Kalachuris, who belonged to the Haihaya dynasty. The Kalachuris of Dakshin Kosala had their capital at Ratanpur. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Kalachuris divided into two branches: the older branch continued to rule at Ratanpur, and the younger branch ruled a separate principality with its capital at Raipur. The Kalachuris, Wills argued, accepted local practices and constructed territorial units that retained a number of the structural features of earlier institutions. The two kingdoms were each subdivided into eighteen districts known as *garhs*, or forts, which were under the charge of *thakurs* or *diwans*, who owed allegiance to the Rajput king. The *garh* was also known as a *chaurasi* (eighty-four) because it was meant to be made up of eighty-four villages. The *garhs* in turn were made up of smaller units called *taluks*. The *taluk*, which was supposed to contain twelve villages and was also known as a *barhon* (twelve), was held by a *dao* or *barhainya* whose authority within the unit closely resembled that of the *diwan* within the *taluk*. The village was held by a *gaonthia* or headman.[10] This "symmetrical arrangement" was not at "any one time exemplified in full detail," but the development of the political system of Chhattisgarh within the confines of a relatively secluded and land-locked region did underlie its particular characteristics marked by a decentralization of authority.[11] Even as the Kalachuris replaced some of the tribal chiefs with north Indian Brahmans, the immigrants localized with subcastes of Chhattisgarhi Brahmans, and the titles Barhainya and Bargainya gradually came to denote a specific group of Brahmans in Chhattisgarh.[12]

In the middle of the eighteenth century Maratha armies passed through Chhattisgarh on their way to attack the Orissa kingdoms in eastern India. The Haihayavanshi kingdom fell to the Maratha general Bhaskar Pant in 1742. The ruler of Ratanpur was, however, allowed to continue under the suzerainty of the Marathas. After one and a half decades of court intrigues and alliances between members of the Haihayavanshi family and the Marathas, Chhattisgarh came under the direct rule of the Bhonsle rajas.

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Bimbaji, the youngest son of Bhonsle raja Raghoji I, ruled the region from 1758 to 1787. [13] Now Bimbaji, although nominally subordinate to the raja of Nagpur, was independent for all practical purposes. He had a separate army and a court with ministers at Ratanpur. From 1787 to 1818 Maratha rule in Chhattisgarh was carried on through *subahdars* (governors).[14]

The Introduction has noted that studies of the Marathas over the past two decades have significantly altered the old understanding (with colonial legacies) of Maratha polity as a predatory empire of the saddle, featuring relentless raids on horseback and an unremitted looting of conquered lands, a portrait of chaos and anarchy, devastation and doom. The picture that has emerged is one of significant continuities between the Mughals and the Marathas, a complex and sophisticated system of revenue contracts and collection, an expansion in agricultural production particularly in the Maratha heartland, the use of coercion for tax collection not as a norm but as a strategy that was deployed selectively, and, finally, the important role of local expectations and resistance in the shaping of Maratha administration.[15] Maratha rule in Chhattisgarh confirms aspects of this picture, but the region also had its own peculiarities. Taken together, this pattern of continuities and differences of the Maratha regime in the region defined critical aspects of the wider context to the formation of Satnampanth. Clearly, we need to discuss these processes, the more so because a demonology of Maratha rule in Chhattisgarh characterizes the existing writings on the subject.

The Maratha domination of Chhattisgarh from the mideighteenth century introduced a number of changes in the political and social order of the region. The Haihayavanshi dynasty was firmly rooted in Chhattisgarh and had ruled over a loosely knit political unit. The Bhonsle, on the other hand, ruled from Nagpur. Chhattisgarh, as a part of a larger polity, was affected by court intrigues and the struggle for power in Nagpur, by the making and breaking of alliances, and by the dynamics of the Maratha confederacy. Moreover, the Marathas created political systems that simultaneously developed and extended constructs of Hindu kingship and made use of many of the administrative methods of the Mughals. The Bhonsle introduced a relatively centralized system of administration in Chhattisgarh. The hereditary position of the *diwans* was abolished. They were replaced by *kamavisdars* who were nonhereditary officials at the level of the administrative unit of the *pargana*, which was at once modeled on the *pargana* under Peshwa—and by extension Mughal—rule and constructed on the edifice of the *chaurasi* of Haihayavanshi rule.[16] The *kamavisdars*, who were paid "partly by acknowledged salaries and partly by perquisites," were followed by *patels*, whose position came to be hereditary, in the administrative hierarchy.[17] The *patels*, generally "needy Brahmins, Marathas and other upper castes," re-

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

placed a number of the *barhon* chiefs (the *barhainyas*). These *patels* received 16 percent of the revenue they collected for the government as payment and also claimed other perquisites. [18] The *pargana*, the effective administrative unit under Maratha rule was divided into villages under the charge of the *gaonthia*—generally an influential man of substance. The *patels* acted as the *gaonthias* in their own villages.[19] Thus, the administrative structure established by the Marathas was fashioned out of preexistent models.

Bhonsle polity had an endemic tendency to run short of resources, therefore to satisfy their monetary needs they followed a policy of territorial expansion and drew high levels of revenue from the conquered regions.[20] While certain tribal rulers continued to resist Maratha presence through armed raids on villages as late as the early nineteenth century, in large parts of the region—not unlike the *pargana* areas of Khandesh and Malwa—Maratha administration moved quickly from looting to a more orderly revenue system.[21] After 1790 the Bhonsle adopted the organizational means of revenue farming in Chhattisgarh.[22]

Captain J. C. Blunt described this practice in a narrative of a journey undertaken in 1794.

> The Subah of Chhattisgarh with its dependencies was at this time rented by the Berar government to Ital Pandit for a specific sum which was payable annually in Nagpur; and who in consideration of the rank of Subahdar and his appointment likewise paid considerable sum—upon further enquiry as to the means by which the Subahdar managed the country I was informed that he farmed different portions of it to his tenants for a constant period and for specific sums nearly upon the same terms as the whole was rented to him. The revenue is collected by his tenantry. ... I was next led to enquire what method was adopted by the tenantry in collecting the revenue from the peasants. They informed me that it invariably consisted in taxing the ploughs and was always delivered in the produce of the lands.[23]

There are problems in the categories used by Blunt: but his narrative directs us toward an understanding of the revenue practices under Maratha *subahdars* in Chhattisgarh.

The total revenue demand for Chhattisgarh was fixed according to instructions from Nagpur, where the *subahdar* was meant to pay a certain sum annually to the Bhonsle capital. The *subahdar* took into consideration the collection of the previous year and divided the amount between the *parganas*. The *pargana* assessment, in turn, was apportioned between villages. The *patels* settled the assessment with the government for a group of villages and were responsible for its payment. To this end, they supplied the cultivators with seeds and cattle (particularly if the *gaonthia* of the village was

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

unable to do this), and made loans of money and grain to *gaonthias* and cultivators, which could be repaid in grain. The distribution of the village assessment was settled by the *gaonthia* and the cultivators. The revenue was collected in three equal installments: the first two installments, collected around September and December, were generally based on the previous year's assessment—although even here the *kamavisdars* could ask the *patels* and *gaonthias* to collect more than in the past year—and the third installment, based on the revised revenue demand fixed by the *subahdar*, had to be paid in March of the following year. Given these rigors, if a *gaonthia* did not accept the arrangement, the village changed hands and a new *gaonthia* was appointed at the time of the payment of the third installment.[24] All this suggests that the edifice of revenue administration at the level of the *subahdar*, the *kamavisdar*, and the *patel* was geared toward maximizing the collection of revenue.

Yet it would be hasty to assume that the system was entirely arbitrary and marked by a purely coercive drive toward extortion of revenue. Andre Wink has shown that revenue farming under the Marathas was "the means to obtain settled revenue from unsettled territory," an organizational form of agrarian restoration at the frontier of agriculture and wasteland.[25] Indeed, in a frontier province like Chhattisgarh revenue farming led to an expansion of cultivation and to the agricultural improvement of land.[26] Moreover, at the time of the payment of the first revenue installment, the *gaonthias* made representations about lands that had fallen out of cultivation, about bad seasons, and about loss of cultivators and cattle, representations that were then considered by "attentive" *kamavisdars*. The *subahdar* in turn heard and investigated the complaints of the cultivators against *gaonthias* and *patels* during his annual tour through the province at the time of the collection of the third revenue installment.[27] Finally, evidence from other regions ruled by the Marathas suggests that the transition from "looting" to a sophisticated cash-based system in a short period of time had rested not only on the Maratha gain of Mughal rights to these areas but also upon their understanding and fulfillment of the expectations of villages.[28] The Bhonsle attempts to prepare rudimentary village papers in Chhattisgarh indicate that they too made efforts in this direction and tried not to override expectations within a village, particularly those of its elite.[29] Of course, local officials could make extra demands and resort to coercion, and in periods of absence of detailed control by the *subahdar* the revenue collections could be extremely high. The peasant response here took the form of resistance through desertion of villages, the strategy of "flight" or "avoidance protest," which was not in the long-term interest of Maratha administration, particularly since it was labor rather than land that was scarce in Chhattisgarh. On the whole, the system of revenue farming run by the

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Bhonsle in Chhattisgarh did not necessarily ride roughshod over the expectations and practices of villages.

How did the revenue system operate at the level of the village? In Chhattisgarh the mode of revenue assessment was based on the *nagar* or the plough. A "plough" of land was an elastic measure. Its actual extent varied in different tracts, but it was intended to represent the area one plough and four oxen could cultivate. The village land and the share of the village revenue was divided among the well-established cultivators according to the number of ploughs of land for which each of them was responsible. This left out the farm servants and other members of the village community who held land broken up from waste outside the main cultivated area and paid rent in cash or kind. The *gaonthia*, an influential cultivator who was responsible for the collection of the village revenue, held one plough of land free of revenue for every eight ploughs of land that paid revenue. He also received remuneration for village expenses of one plough of land in sixteen. [30] Under Maratha rule, the *gaonthias* were generally keen to bring more land under the plough since, on the one hand, it increased their revenue-free holdings and, on the other, it helped them to cope with the revenue demand of Maratha administration. This fresh land could be brought under cultivation by attracting new settlers.

The *gaonthias* were aided in this process by the institution of *lakhabata*, or the periodic redistribution of land. Agnew first referred to the practice of redistribution of land by *gaonthias* and cultivators as a characteristic of the revenue administration under the Marathas in Chhattisgarh.[31] Later administrators emphasized the "tribal" and "egalitarian" features of the institution, and argued that it was a relic of pre-Maratha times.[32] Given the thinness of (official and oral) evidence about *lakhabata*, we cannot be certain about the roots of the institution or indeed about many of the details of the way the system actually worked. Yet, certain broad features of *lakhabata* stand out. Chhattisgarh is marked by considerable diversity of soils. The variety of lands within a village used to be constituted into equally valued plots: the *gaonthia* had a certain share in each of these blocks and the rest was distributed among the other cultivators within the village. The institution of *lakhabata* meant that blocks of land within the village were periodically redistributed to ensure that members of the village got a share of both poor and good land. It was carried out to accommodate new settlers. The practice also came into play when a village changed hands and a new *gaonthia* entered the fray, which was not uncommon under *subah* administration.[33] The practice of *lakhabata* made for an expansion in cultivation during Maratha administration. However, the institution also had a contradictory dimension since it meant that well-off cultivators could claim the lands of "poor and cattleless" cultivators, which included a large number of Chamars.[34]

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

What was the situation of Chamars within the agrarian hierarchy and the revenue system under Maratha administration? The evidence is extremely fragmentary. In 1820 Agnew reported that Chamars accounted for 12,306 of the total 100,603 families (households?) in the *khalsa* of Chhattisgarh. [35] He did not, however, specify the occupations of Chamars (or of any of the other castes) and their location within the agrarian hierarchy. Instead, Agnew provided a rough estimate—without indicating the basis on which he had arrived at the figures—that out of the total of 100,603 families 33,177 were cultivators, 53,180 were traders, merchants, and servants, and 14,246 were unemployed.[36] At the same time, his survey indicated the existence of Chamar *gaonthias*, and later colonial administrators emphasized that the Chamars of Chhattisgarh primarily worked on land.[37]

We have noted that the period of Maratha rule witnessed an expansion of cultivation in Chhattisgarh. In a land-surplus situation, the Chamars had the option of clearing the jungle and settling land. According to an oral tradition Kosa, a village in present-day Durg district populated primarily by Satnamis, was founded around the end of the eighteenth century by a Chamar.[38] Evidence on the pattern of settlement of castes from the second half of the nineteenth century indicates the existence of *ekjati* (single-caste) villages made up primarily of Chamars (who had now become Satnamis) with their own *gaonthias*.[39] What proportion of Chamars lived in these *ekjati* villages? There is little reliable evidence to provide a firm estimate. However, it is clear that the Chamars also lived in villages populated by other castes in a separate *para* (neighborhood). The settling of new villages required ploughs, cattle, and seeds, which often had to be borrowed from upper-caste *patels*. This made it difficult for all Chamars to set out and establish their own villages. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a large number of Chamar cultivators (who carried out agricultural operations by hiring cattle from more substantial members of the village community) and farm servants (who received one-fourth of the produce as their share) lived in villages inhabited by different castes, and they did not migrate to the single-caste Chamar villages.[40]

Was there an increase in the dependence and subordination of Chamars in this period? It is possible to discern two simultaneous movements. In a region where imports were consistently higher than exports and the spread of money economy uneven, a cash-based revenue system meant that problems of money supply, particularly in periods of warfare and turmoil, could lead to an increased dependence of Chamar cultivators and *gaonthias* on higher-caste *patels*, who also made loans of grain and money.[41] On the other hand, the lack of skilled labor in Chhattisgarh and the desire of Bhonsle administration to enhance cash revenue meant that Chamar ploughmen and agricultural laborers retained an element of bargaining

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

power through the strategy of migration. Chamars, along with other day laborers and ploughmen, adopted the desertion of villages as a mode of resisting officeholders, landlords, and rich peasants. Entire villages were deserted during the period of *subahdar* rule. [42] In the 1850s British commentators were still lamenting the "migratory nature" of the people of Chhattisgarh.[43] We should not underestimate the difficulties involved in the strategy of flight since there was an element of uncertainty built into the tactic, but it offered poor ploughmen and farm servants a feasible way to resist and retain their bargaining power. Moreover, the results of *lakhabata* for Chamar cultivators were not uniform: in certain fertile areas their lands could be appropriated by *gaonthias* and substantial cultivators, and in other parts *lakhabata* led Chamars to meeting the revenue demand of the state and participating in the expansion of cultivation.[44] Did poor cultivators have any option other than the desertion of villages? We have noted that the *subahdar* was meant to hear the complaints of cultivators against *patels* and *gaonthias*, but the caste character of Maratha administration was weighted against Chamars and other low castes.

Bhonsle rule in Chhattisgarh was modeled on the structure of the Peshwas at Poona. Fukuzawa has demonstrated that the role of the Peshwas had included the enforcement of religious hierarchies and they had acted as the executors of Brahman religious authorities in disputes over ritual matters and in caste relationships.[45] The pattern tended to be replicated in Chhattisgarh. Maratha rule in the region was accompanied by the arrival of orthodox upper castes. The *kamavisdars* were Brahmans. The *barhon* chiefs were replaced by *patels* who were, once again, Brahmans from Maharashtra and other "high castes."[46] Maharashtrian Brahmans considered the Chhattisgarhis lower in purity and status.[47] The administrative practices of the Marathas were based upon Brahmanical values, and it was thus that they undertook steps toward the protection of cows in Chhattisgarh.[48] Agnew also commented on the pattern of unequal punishment for upper castes and lower castes under the Marathas: Brahmans and a few other castes were exempt from the penalty of death and from certain taxes, including the *pandhri* (house tax levied on nonagriculturists); the Chamars clearly did not figure in the list of castes who received lighter punishment.[49] Did this growing rigidity of Brahmanical concerns of purity and pollution under Maratha rule also lead to a greater reinforcement of the restrictions on the Chamars in the use of particular clothes, ornaments, and modes of transport? Did the Chamars now face a growth in prohibitions governing the use of ponds and tanks and access to resources such as trees and fallow lands in the domain of village life because of their ascribed low ritual status? We have little evidence, but this may well have been the case. Clearly, the difficulties of the group were compounded by the fact that the upper-caste *patels*, who

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

supplied the cultivators with loans of grain and money, were important figures in the system of civil justice as the *gaonthias* of their villages. These *patels* also tended to exercise detailed authority over a group of villages, and could often influence Brahman *kamavisdars*. [50]

What can we make of the situation of Chamars under Bhonsle rule, particularly in the first two decades of the nineteenth century? Members of the caste had established Chamar villages with their own *gaonthias*. At the same time, other Chamars continued to remain sharecroppers, agricultural laborers, and poor ploughmen. Even Chamar *gaonthias* and substantial cultivators had to cope with the largely Brahman and upper-caste *patels*. *Lakhabata* both worked to the benefit of some Chamar cultivators and pushed others to the margins of village society. Migration and the desertion of villages provided members of the group with a mode to cope with, resist, and retain their bargaining power in relation to *patels* and influential *gaonthias*. At the same time, apart from the forms of discrimination that were structured into the specific caste character of Bhonsle administration, survival was particularly difficult during periods of warfare and at other times that witnessed a large increase in the revenue demand of the state. The depredations of the Pindaris in the early nineteenth century, for example, fitted the bill, and in the period between 1806 and 1817, the Pindaris under their leader Chitu devastated and plundered large parts of territories in Chhattisgarh. Likewise, in the course of the last eighteen years of *subahdar* rule the revenue assessment increased more than three times from Rs.1,63,000 to Rs.3,83,000.[51] If certain processes aided the Chamars, there was also a great deal working against the group.

In 1817, after the Bhonsle defeat in the battle of Sitabaldi, the administration of Chhattisgarh passed into the hands of the British. The Bhonsle had become a subsidiary ally of the company in 1815.[52] In the period between 1818 and 1830, when the Bhonsle king was a minor, the administration of Chhattisgarh was carried out by British superintendents. Major Vans Agnew, the most enterprising of these superintendents, undertook a series of significant measures during his tenure from 1818 to 1825. These measures increased the powers of the *gaonthia* and the village *panchayat*: the powers of the *patel* were restricted; Agnew sought to establish direct links with and supported the *gaonthias*; and the village *panchayats* were revived through official support to these institutions.[53] Thus, at the level of the village, the locus of power shifted from the *patel* to the *gaonthia* and the *panchayat*. These changes were further intertwined with the superintendents' enforcements and changes in the administration of law. Agnew made a bid to rationalize civil and criminal judicial administration. The system was streamlined so that treason, crimes against the state, murders, and major thefts were detected through the agency of the *gaonthia* and *kamavisdar*

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

and reported to the superintendent. The *gaonthias* and *kamavisdars* were given powers of "judicial superintendence"—to be exercised in accordance with custom and local usage—over their villages and *parganas*, respectively. [54] Now these processes involving shifts in the configurations of power in local arenas could aid Chamar *gaonthias* against Brahman and Maratha *patels*. But the changes also meant that upper-caste *gaonthias* and *kamavisdars* could play upon British misunderstanding of customary legal forms to entrench themselves in power, which worked to the disadvantage of Chamars.

The period also witnessed two simultaneous processes in the field of revenue administration and practices. The British modified the Maratha revenue system by abolishing supplementary revenue demands and the revenue officials' unauthorized perquisites, by fixing the times for the payment of revenue installments at periods that suited the cultivators and by granting receipts to the cultivators for payments made to *gaonthias*. However, there were no radical changes in the method of assessment and there were important continuities in revenue practices. The colonial goal of a progressively rising land revenue, evident under the administration of the superintendents, could contradict the hopes of an improvement of the peasantry. *Lakhabata* too worked against the poor Chamar and other low-caste ploughmen. Sinclair, a settlement officer, commented on the functioning of the institution between 1820 and 1854.

> The cultivators as a rule never demurred; they, in fact, looked upon this partition or *bata* as a means of protection from the landlords' extra demands on the steps of the increased government demand. They knew that a certain sum must be paid and from their pockets and, therefore, the best policy was to turn out the poor and cattleless Raiyats and apportion their lands pro ratio among the better classes.[55]

The Chhattisgarhi cultivators, including Chamars, still resisted these developments through the desertion of villages. The increased emphasis on settled agriculture as a mark of rural stability, however, meant that the tactic perhaps did not always work well as a bargaining strategy since now the cultivators courted the danger of being cast as unruly elements. Once again, the Chamars gained in certain fields but lost out in other arenas.

The period from the late eighteenth century to the midnineteenth century was attended by fairly rapid changes in the center of authority. We have seen that the Maratha *subahdars* who had assumed charge of Chhattisgarh from the 1780s were followed by British superintendents within three decades. In both cases, the change in central authority was emphasized by the new administrative measures introduced by these Maratha and British officials. Once more, after Raghoji III came of age

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

in June 1830, the administration reverted to the Bhonsle raja, and Chhattisgarh was governed by Maratha *subahdars* till 1854. Although the Marathas did not tamper with the new and modified scheme of administration inaugurated by the British superintendents, their assumption of rule between 1830 and 1854 nonetheless formed part of a wider pattern. Indeed, the displacements in central authority between the late eighteenth and midnineteenth centuries served to highlight the stress of the period and the strain of the time centered on processes of social change, which often pulled in contrary directions. This wider context—its threads will be picked up again very shortly—informed the construction of Satnampanth in Chhattisgarh in the early nineteenth century.

Popular Traditions, Hegemonic Hierarchies, and the Construction of Satnampanth

Satnam as a sign and symbol of the sacred had been the centerpiece of sects in north India long before it was seized upon by the Chamars of Chhattisgarh. The Satnamis first find mention as a small sect that rebelled against Aurangzeb in the fifteenth year of his reign (1672 C.E.). It was founded by Birbhan in 1657 in Narnaul, eastern Punjab. [56] A seventeenth-century chronicler described the group as mendicants, also known as Mundiyas, consisting of between four and five thousand householders in the Mughal *parganas* of Narnaul and Mewat.

> Although these Mundiyas dress like mendicants yet their livelihood and profession is usually agriculture and trade in the manner of small merchants with small capital. Living according to the ways of their own community they aspire to reach the status of a good name (*nek-nam*) which is the meaning of the word Satnam. But if anyone should want to impose tyranny and oppression upon them as a display of courage and authority, they will not tolerate it; and most of them bear arms and weapons.[57]

The group's lack of submission to the authorities then was apparent long before the actual revolt against the Mughal emperor which in turn began as a "rural affray."[58] The popular character of the rebellion was clear, "It is cause for wonder that a gang of bloody, miserable rebels ... carpenters, sweepers, tanners, and other ignoble beings, braggarts and fools of all descriptions, should become so puffed up with vain-glory as to cast themselves headlong into the pit of self-destruction."[59] A "millenarian" aspect followed as the "malignant" people sprang up like "white ants" and descended like "locusts." "It is affirmed that these people considered themselves immortal;

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

seventy lives was the reward promised to every one of them who fell in action. A body of about 5000 had collected in the neighborhood of Narnaul, and were in open rebellion. Cities and districts were plundered." The insurrection was initially successful. It was defeated by a large imperial army sent from the Mughal court after a battle of epic proportions from which few Satnamis escaped with their lives. [60] The royal chronicler had no more space for the background and characteristics of these insurgents. We know little about the "ways of community" of these mendicant-householders who engaged in trade, agriculture, and a variety of other professions. If a contemporary writer found them merely "foul, filthy, and impure,"[61] Irfan Habib's account of the beliefs and practices of the Satnamis or Mundiyas of Narnaul is based on a text of the Sadh sect of Farrukabad that was compiled in the early nineteenth century.[62]

The Sadhs were possibly the descendants of Mundias—one of their myths situated the founder and the formation of the sect in Bijhasar in the Narnaul region—which scattered after the defeat of the rebellion over the upper part of the Doab from the area west of Delhi to Farrukabad. In 1832, H. H. Wilson published a description of the sect that originated with Birbhan. Birbhan received a miraculous communication from *satguru* (true guru), also known as Udaidas, who in turn was the servant of the one god. The tenets of the sect were known as *malik ka hukum* (the embodied word of god) and were communicated in *sabdas* and *sakhis* (detached stanzas). They were complied into manuals and the substance was collected in a tract entitled *Adi Upadesh*, first precepts, which organized the entire code under twelve *hukums* or commandments.[63] The Sadhs believed in one god called *satnam* who created the universe with his will and was formless: "Acknowledge but one God who made and can destroy you, to whom there is none superior and to whom alone is therefore worship due, not to earth, nor stone, nor metal, nor wood, nor trees, nor any created thing. There is but one Lord, and the word of the Lord. Bow not your head in the presence of idols or of men."[64] The members of the sect did not have temples but met in a house or courtyard on every full moon when they ate together and spent the night singing and reciting stanzas attributed to Birbhan and the verses of Nanak and Kabir.[65] The boundedness of the group was manifest in the injunction to members to "avoid intercourse with all not of the same faith, eat not of a strangers bread," and in their denial of caste distinctions within the community.[66] It was accompanied by a rejection of rituals and local superstitions.[67] The sect construed the householder, the man-in-the-world, as an ascetic marked by disdain for wealth and authority. Members were enjoined not to assume the garb of a mendicant, solicit alms, accept gifts, harass the poor, or to keep the company of kings and wealthy men. The meetings of the pious were the only places of pilgrimage and god was the giver of

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

all things. [68] The Sadhs worked toward a pure state of the body and senses: they had to wear white garments, shun intoxicating substances and evil influences—opium, tobacco, betel leaves, perfumes, gossip, calumny, music, and dances—and direct their energies toward praise of the creator. There were injunctions against lying and stealing, the use of violence and force, and an emphasis on monogamy where the woman had to be obedient to the man.[69] The twelve commandments were repeated in a variety of ways in both the *Adi Upadesh* and the *Satnam Sahai*. The variations do not add significantly to the basic pattern of Sadh beliefs and practices. The group also believed in the real but temporary existence of inferior deities and their incarnations. The community was concentrated in the main in a suburb called Sadhwara near Farrukabad where their number was estimated at two thousand.[70] The Sadhs were also known as Satnamis because of their worship of *satnam*. At the same time, Wilson emphasized, "this appellation more especially indicates a different, although kindred sect."[71]

Wilson was referring to the sect of Satnamis founded by Jagjiwandas in Barabanki district, near Lucknow, in the early eighteenth century. Jagjiwandas was born into a family of Thakur landlords in the Sardaha village in Barabanki district in the 1680s.[72] The change in Jagjiwandas's life came after his encounter, when still a boy, with Bulla Sahib, a disciple of the Sufi mystic Yari Shah who lived in Delhi between 1668 and 1725. A poor farm servant, Bulla Sahib did not believe in rituals and refused to initiate Jagjiwandas as his disciple. But Bulla Sahib's favor and potent touch were enough for Jagjiwandas. His soul awakened. A new sect was begun. These Satnamis were expected "to adore the true name alone, the one God, the cause and creator of all things, Nirgun or void of sensible qualities."[73] Members were prohibited the use of meat, *masur* (red lentils), liquor, and aubergines. Jagjiwandas's asceticism did not prevent him from continuing as a householder through his life. It spoke of a moral code that enjoined indifference to the world and an implicit devotion to one's spiritual guide while discharging everyday social and religious obligations. In spite of their belief in one supreme god, the Satnamis recognized the entire Hindu pantheon. They revered all incarnations, particularly Ram and Krishna, as manifestations of the nature of the true deity, and accorded a special place to the god Hanuman. The *Agh Binsh*, the sacred book of the Satnamis, contained stories from Puranas, lessons on morals, ethics, and divinity derived from Sanskrit religious texts, and rules of piety. Jagjiwandas also wrote several other texts featuring Hindu divinities. Caste distinctions were retained within the sect: "On the contrary, its professors seem careful not to interfere with caste prejudices and family customs. ... The water in which the Guru's feet have been washed, is drunk only when the Guru is of equal or higher caste than the disciple."[74] The Satnamis gained a few adherents among different

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

groups. Jagjiwandas had two Muslim disciples and a low-caste Kori disciple who "converted Chamars and other low caste Hindus to the faith." At the same time, most of Jagjiwandas's followers were Rajputs and Brahmans. While two of his disciples went north to Ambala and Amritsar, most settled in Barabanki near the village of Sardaha. A very high proportion of the near ten thousand members of the sect lived in the region around Barabanki, although they were notionally meant to have "spread across all parts of North India from Banaras to Amritsar." [75]

The Satnami sect founded by Ghasidas was almost exclusive to the Chamars of Chhattisgarh. Ghasidas was born in the village of Girod, next to the forest of Sonakhan, in the northeast of present-day Raipur district. Chisholm, a settlement officer, basing himself on oral testimony in the 1860s, dated Ghasidas's birth around 1770.[76] He was the fourth son of Mahngu and Amraotin, a family of farm servants. The boy Ghasi performed miracles such as producing sugarcane out of a fallow field while playing with his friends. As he grew older, Ghasidas seemed to spend more and more time in meditation. Mahngu and Amraotin, fearing that their son was turning into a *bahiya* (a man touched with divine madness), arranged to have him married to Safura. Ghasidas became a farm servant of Gopal Marar, a member of a vegetable-growing caste. Soon he fathered two sons, Amru and Balak. Ghasidas continued to perform the work of ploughing for his agricultural master as a means to support his family. The master felt that Ghasidas did not work properly until one day he saw that the plough being used by this farm servant was moving on its own accord. The master fell on Ghasidas's feet and accepted his authority.[77]

Ghasidas's fame grew. Chisholm was to later describe the unlettered man who would be guru.

> He was a man of unusually fair complexion and rather imposing appearance, sensitive and silent, given to seeing visions, and deeply resenting the harsh treatment of his brotherhood by the Hindoos. He ... had the reputation of being exceptionally sagacious, and was universally respected. By some he was believed to possess supernatural powers, by others curative powers only, by all he was deemed a remarkable man.[78]

Ghasidas acquired a band of devoted followers. He decided to go into the forest of Sonakhan to meditate. In Satnami myths, Ghasidas was led to the forest because of his grief over the death of his children and his wife. The administrator's account, on the other hand, explained Ghasidas's move as a consequence of his desire to become a prophet, impelled by both his followers' "constant importunities" and his feeling of "personal vanity."[79] The followers spread the news of this withdrawal into the wilderness and intimated

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

to the Chamars that Ghasidas intended to emerge, after six months, with a revelation.

> Chamars from all parts of Chhattisgarh began to collect in Girod to receive the message. The scene as described by an eye witness was strange and impressive. The roads leading to this hitherto unfrequented hamlet were traversed by crowds of anxious pilgrims. The young and old of both sexes swelled the throng—mothers carrying their infants, and the aged and infirm led by stronger arms. Some died by the way, but the enthusiasm was not stayed. Arrived at the spot, the plain skirting the rocky eminence presented to the eye a vast multitude of human beings, divided into different knots, discussing the strange crisis which had brought them together. [80]

After six months, in the quiet of the early morning, the crowd acclaimed Ghasidas's return as he walked down the mountain, which faced Girod. Ghasidas explained that he had been "miraculously sustained" in the forest and had "held communion" with a "higher power," *satnam*, who had instructed him to deliver his message to the Chamars.

Ghasidas became the guru of a new sect. The guru forbade his disciples idol worship, instructed them to believe only in *satnam* who was formless and the maker of the universe, and to follow a code of "social equality."[81] Satnampanth turned its members into Satnamis. Satnamis were forbidden meat, liquor, tobacco, and certain vegetables and pulses. They were asked not to use cows for cultivation or to plough after the midday meal. The Satnamis maintained their distance from Kanaujia Chamars—the major division of the Chamars in the region, who did not join Satnampanth and who in turn retained their separate identity.[82] Ghasidas lived to the age of eighty having survived several attempts on his life prompted by upper-caste hatred. When he died around 1850 Satnampanth had 250,000 members and the guru's teachings had become a "living element in society."[83]

The making of Satnampanth was both a response to and informed by processes of social change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Chhattisgarh: the discriminatory character of Bhonsle administration toward low castes and the growing rigidity of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution; the institution of *lakhabata* and revenue practices that allowed some Chamars to establish their own villages and pushed others to the margins of village society; and dislocations within the sociopolitical order and rapid displacements in the center of authority. Indeed, the simultaneous subordination of and assertion by Chamars provided the context for the creation of Satnampanth, an endeavor that fashioned its vision of the sacred and the divine by reworking the relationship of its members with the interlocking hierarchies of caste and centers of ritual power.

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

In the middle of the 1860s Chisholm stated that the "movement" was not more than fifty years old and had occurred between 1820 and 1830. Was this the making of a colonial myth that a low-caste monotheistic sect, which opposed the caste system, could come into existence only after the British superintendents had moved into Chhattisgarh in 1818? Chisholm's speculative history could indeed lend itself to such readings: but his rough chronology, based on oral testimonies, is corroborated by other sources. The Satnamis were not featured in a discussion of sects and ascetic customs in a detailed Marathi manuscript, compiled around 1818, which dealt with the history, inhabitants, and institutions of Chhattisgarh. [84] Agnew, a keen observer, also did not mention the sect in his account of religion in Chhattisgarh written in 1820. While the processes that informed the making of Satnampanth had been underway since the late eighteenth century, the actual construction of the subordinate initiative needs to be located over the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The period between the 1820s and the 1840s witnessed the creation and accumulation of myths about Ghasidas.[85] The truncated, abbreviated, and reworked versions of some of these myths were to then put in an appearance in the accounts of colonial administrators written in the 1860s.[86] The rituals and practices of Satnampanth became a part of the lived-in world of its members—which also included a small number of members of the Teli (oil presser) and Rawat (grazier) castes—by the middle of the nineteenth century.[87]

Were there links between the Satnamis of north India and the sect that developed among the Chamars of Chhattisgarh? The Sadhs and Satnamis of north India and Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh shared common features. The most obvious parallel here is the belief in one supreme god who went under the name of *satnam*. The notion of *satnam* could indeed have come from the north via mercenaries or pilgrims and formed a part of popular religious discourse, a fluid world of ideas, to be seized upon by Ghasidas and the Chamars of Chhattisgarh. Second, there were injunctions in all these sects against the use of intoxicants, and similarities between the Satnamis of Barabanki and Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh in the prohibitions on red pulses and certain vegetables such as aubergines. Third, none of these sects incorporated the overarching opposition between the man-in-the-world and the individual-outside-the-world—central to Dumont's discussion of caste and sect—and instead construed the householder as an ascetic. Finally, we find a parallel in the myths of these sectarian formations. The legends of the Satnamis of Barabanki recount that Jagjiwandas's guru Bulla Sahib was a farm servant of Gulal Sahib. Bulla used to lose himself in meditation while working in the fields. Once a displeased Gulal Sahib confronted Bulla who was ploughing the field with his attention fixed on another world. Bulla answered, "You are the master of my body and it is doing

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

its work, but my soul is with her [the soul's] lord." Gulal was deeply ashamed and became a disciple of Bulla Sahib. [88] A myth of Satnampanth featuring Ghasidas's encounter with Gopal Marar, where the Chamar farm servant worked the fields without letting his hands touch the plough, eventually compelling the agricultural master to accept his authority, seems an elaboration and variation on the theme.[89] These beliefs and practices of the north Indian sects may well have been carried to Chhattisgarh by mercenaries, pilgrims, and other migrants who settled in the region.

It would be hasty, however, to make too much of these continuities. A number of the shared features and parallels between the Sadhs and the Satnamis of Barabanki and the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh will be shown to extend to other sects. There were also significant differences. The sects of the north had developed largely among twice-born castes, while Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh drew its motive force from reconstituting the untouchable status of its Chamar members. The beliefs of the Sadhs and Satnamis of Barabanki centered on the written word, the *Adi Upadesh* and *Agh Binsh*, respectively, and sectarian texts formed an important part of their religious practices. On the other hand, Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh was rooted within oral traditions and did not share the emphasis of the other two sects on the importance of the revealed word of god. The *satguru* of the Sadhs was the servant of god who carried the word of *satnam*, but in Satnampanth *satnampurush* was established as the embodied form of the true deity, *satnam*. It followed, therefore, that unlike the two north Indian sects Satnampanth, at least initially, had no place for the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Finally, Satnampanth situated the characteristics it held in common with the Sadhs and the Satnamis of Barabanki alongside the beliefs and practices of other popular traditions.

Kabirpanth constituted a significant presence within Chhattisgarh. The Kabirpanthis of Chhattisgarh claim that Kabir (1448–1518 C.E.) began preaching in Rewa, north of Bilaspur, and that their first preceptor Dharamdass, a Bania, also belonged to Rewa. The center of the Kabirpanthis of Chhattisgarh was at Kawardha, the seat of the *mahant*. The *mahants* of Kawardha claim direct descent from Dharamdass.[90] Kabirpanth forbade the worship of idols and deities, the members were not allowed meat and intoxicants, and the sect had its distinctive rituals and practices. The members of Kabirpanth were, in the main, Pankas and Telis. Pankas are Gandas whose traditional caste occupation set them out as village watchmen. In Chhattisgarh, the Pankas have formed a separate division of Gandas. They are members of Kabirpanth, disown their connection with the Gandas, and hold that their name is derivative of *pani-ka* (from water), which establishes their affinity with Kabir who is said to have been found floating in water as a baby.[91] The Telis, whose traditional occupation was oil

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

pressing, were divided into two groups, Kabirhas and Deotahas. The Kabirhas did not worship idols, images, or deities and refrained from meat and intoxicants, while the Deotahas worshiped deities, including images of Kabir, and did not observe restrictions on food. [92] However, the two groups did intermarry. Kabirpanth of Chhattisgarh had a well-defined ritual structure by the early nineteenth century.

Satnampanth drew upon the symbols and practices of Kabirpanth and situated them in a new context. The *chauka*, a square figure made with wheat flour, was altered and simplified, divested of its associations with the texts of Kabirpanth, and pressed into the service of *satnampurush* and Ghasidas in the Satnami modes of worship. The tying of the *kanthi*, a black string with wooden beads, signaled the incorporation of a neophyte into both Kabirpanth and Satnampanth, but the *mantra* (incantation) that accompanied this act of initiation was very different in the two sects.[93] All this was part of wider processes of intersectarian rivalry and the mechanisms of expansion of religious orders, where preexistent symbols were claimed and infused with new meanings to establish the distinction of a new sect and its modes of worship.[94] The accent was no differences between religious orders. Kabirpanthis—like the Satnamis of Barabanki who had attracted a few low-caste members—professed an indifference to the world but retained caste distinctions in everyday life. The reproduction of the sect was carried out through spiritual-genealogical links between gurus and disciples, and the issues of consanguinity and commensality in the life of the householder were left untouched.[95] In Satnampanth, on the other hand, the initiation by a guru, a critical event, was accompanied by a denial of distinctions between caste and sect. It was thus that while Kabirpanth permitted marriages between Kabirha and Deotaha Telis, Satnampanth—presided over by a householder guru—did not allow marriages and relations of commensality with Kanaujia Chamars who did not accept the authority of Ghasidas and continued with the practice of removing the carcasses and dealing in the skins of dead cattle. There were to be no distinctions within Satnampanth between Telis, Rawats, and Chamars once they joined the sect.[96]

Satnampanth combined the appropriation of elements from popular sects and traditions with a set of focal signs drawn from the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution. The formation of Satnampanth, in fact, occurred within a symbolic universe filled with substances and practices inherently polyvalent and with multiple associations. Ghasidas forbade the Satnamis meat, liquor, tobacco, and certain pulses and vegetables. The injunctions were common to Kabirpanth, the Satnamis of Awadh, and other sects and also pressed dominant meanings within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution. These substances were sectarian markers, the bearers of impurity, and, often, the signifiers of a low ritual status. Satnampanth cast off impure

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

substances and practices. The members of Satnampanth were prohibited the use of cows for cultivation and were asked not to plough after the midday meal. It is significant that the Marathas had undertaken steps toward the protection of cows in Chhattisgarh, and the Gonds of the region had given up the practice of using cows for cultivation. [97] The Satnamis, as Chamars, had removed the carcasses of dead cows, bullocks, and buffaloes within the village. They had a claim on the skins and the flesh (which they ate) of the dead animals. It was this association with the death substances of a higher being, the cow, which underlay their lowness, situating the group at the margins of village society, outside the central network of relationships defined by service castes. The prohibitions within Satnampanth effected a change in the Satnami relationship with the sacred cow, sought to end the stigma attached to their earlier caste practice, and established a claim to purity. This act of reworking their place within social and ritual hierarchies had led the Satnamis to reject the practice—the acceptance of substances of death pollution from the higher castes—which had defined their low position in the caste order.[98] Clearly, the Satnamis drew upon the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution to question their subordination.

The accent within Satnampanth was on the purity of the body. This purity had to be maintained. The guru played a critical role here. After the initiation of Satnampanth, the guru's home became a major pilgrimage for its members.[99] Moreover, Ghasidas began the tradition of *ramat*, in which the guru and his sons traveled to areas with a concentration of Satnami population to provide *darshan* (vision).[100] In the pilgrimage to Bhandar and during *ramat* the Satnamis offered coconuts (and later money) to the guru and then drank the *amrit*, water in which they had washed the guru's feet.[101] Edward Harper and Lawrence Babb have both shown that *charanamrit* (nectar of the feet), a mark of "respect pollution," is a sign and practice embedded within the divine and ritual hierarchies of Hinduism.[102] In a fundamental act that repositioned a major sign of the divine and ritual hierarchies of the caste order, the *charanamrit* that was obtained from washing the feet of the deities of the Hindu pantheon (and of certain superordinates within the ritual hierarchy of caste society) had become a distinctive symbol of the substance of the guru's authority and purity. Ghasidas was fashioned as a guru who combined the characteristics of a saint, a shaman, and a healer. His *amrit* not only purified but also healed and regenerated the bodies of Satnamis. It cured snakebites, fulfilled desires for the birth of a child, and repaired bodies.[103]

Satnampanth not only drew upon, but it also rejected elements of the hegemonic hierarchies within caste society. The sect had no place for gods and goddesses who were active members of the cosmic order, the beings who defined and sustained a divine hierarchy. We know of the close connection

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

between divine and social hierarchies within caste society. A person's ritual status is closely tied to his/her access to gods within the divine hierarchy. [104] This matrix is operated by gods and goddesses. But Satnampanth rejected the *devi-devtas* (gods and goddesses) who were themselves *murtipujak* (idol-worshiping) beings. In a dramatic move, which sought to abolish the marks of a low ritual status, Ghasidas countered the machinations of village gods and goddesses by throwing them onto a rubbish heap.[105] The guru established *maghi puno* (the night of the full moon in *magh*, January–February), *bhad athon* (the eighth day of *bhad*, August—September), and *dashera* (the tenth day of *ashwin*, October) as sacred dates in the Satnami ritual calendar.[106] In the constitution of sacred time for the Satnamis, these dates were associated with the gurus rather than the divinities of the Hindu pantheon. Moreover, Satnampanth had no temples. Its members were to worship *satnam* by repeating his name, morning and evening, facing the sun. This abolition of the divine hierarchy was accompanied by a rejection of the figure of the priest, whose place and function are closely tied to the ritual hierarchy within caste society. *Satnampurush* and the gurus were established as the mythic figures who displaced the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Ghasidas established the position of *bhandari* who replaced the *purohit* within Satnampanth. The *bhandari*, as a nominated representative of the guru in a village, conducted the life-cycle rituals and played a major role in the festivals of the Satnamis. Finally, the rituals of Satnampanth came to underscore the closeness, the bounded nature, of the Satnamis. Here the entire Satnami population of the village participated. The rites were conducted in the name of *satnampurush* and Ghasidas by the *bhandari*.[107]

The formation of Satnampanth followed a process of symbolic construction that drew upon existent hegemonies and traditions and situated the symbolic forms in a new context.[108] The repositioned signs, placed together, reinforced each other as markers that defined the boundary of Satnampanth in relation to other groups. The appropriation and repositioning of the signs and practices of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the symbolic forms of other traditions led to the creation of Satnampanth as a pure body which in turn cleansed the bodies of its members of signs of impurity. The signs of purity embodied by the Satnamis worked alongside their rejection of the divine hierarchy and the figure of contest the priest, which are closely tied to social hierarchy, to question and contest the subordination of the Satnamis within the caste order. At the same time, there were limits to the challenge. The Satnami questioning of their subordination reproduced the significance of dominant meanings of purity and pollution and relations of authority centering on the gurus within Satnampanth. These themes are elaborated in the chapters that follow.

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Chapter Three
Malguzars, Gurus, and Missionaries, 1850–1900

In 1854, after Raghoji III died without an heir, the British acquired Chhattisgarh under the doctrine of lapse as part of the territories of the raja of Nagpur. The next decade saw revenue settlements and the establishment of a new set of property rights in land. The administrators' concern over the privileged position of *malguzars* (village proprietors) led to a shift in policy and legislation in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, but the few changes that were effected remained within the framework of the agrarian hierarchy and proprietary rights established during the 1860s. Even as the processes within the agrarian economy worked against the majority of the Satnamis, the new property rights fed into the authority of the gurus. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an elaboration of the organizational hierarchy and the practices of Satnampanth. The guru as the head of the organizational hierarchy and the owner-proprietor of Bhandar simultaneously acquired symbolically constituted attributes of royalty and embodied the power and the truth of *satnam*. Evangelical missionaries, bearing the cross and signs of civilization, made a bid to deprive the gurus of the allegiance of Satnamis. In 1868 Oscar Lohr, the first missionary of the German Evangelical Mission Society, began work among the Satnamis. A pioneer missionary had chanced upon a group of heathens

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

whose faith enjoined them to believe in one god and to reject idolatry and caste. Was this not the hand of "Divine Providence"? Oscar Lohr, it seemed, had only to reveal the evangelical "truth" to the Satnamis before they would *en masse* "witness" and be delivered by Christ the Savior. The Satnamis did not see the coming of the millennium. The group did not go forward to meet its "destiny." The missionaries persevered. The halting enterprise of conversion to Christianity among the Satnamis grew through ties of kinship and the prospects of a better life under the paternalist economy of mission stations. These converts received missionary regulations through the grid of local cultures. The new masters reaped an unusual harvest.

Altered Contexts

After acquiring the territories of the raja of Nagpur the British reconstituted the administration. In 1861 the Central Provinces were created as an administrative region, and within Chhattisgarh Raipur and Bilaspur were established as separate districts. Land revenue policy and practices constituted the principal concern of British administration. Indeed, land revenue was the most important source of income for the state. It made for more than half of the total revenue of the province. [1] Moreover, the question of land revenue was closely linked to the efforts of the administrators to increase the prosperity of the region.[2] Finally, the wider system of law and order—constituted by civil and criminal judicial administration and the police—worked in tandem with revenue administration. The law courts and the police enforced the rules and punished the transgressions of the regulations of the revenue administration.

The years between 1854 and 1868 witnessed three summary settlements where the administrators sought to clearly define the rights of the government, *gaonthias*, and the cultivators through the introduction of British legal concepts of property and contract. These trends underlay a decision in 1860 by the administration of the Nagpur province to revise the land revenue and confer proprietary rights on village headmen. The detailed procedures for the land revenue settlements were embodied in the settlement code of 1863. The first question emerging concerned the proportion of landlord's assets to be collected as land revenue.[3] The new land revenue settlements were based upon prospective rather than existing profits. In Chhattisgarh, settlement officers expected a large increase of profits in the ensuing period and fixed on one-half to two-thirds of the *gaonthia*'s assets as land revenue. This meant an imposition of "the largest increase that was practicable" in order to encourage a rise in rents and an entrepreneurial attitude on the part of the landlords.[4] The settlement officers, following an

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

"aggregate to detail" method, estimated the produce and the revenue of a group of villages and then divided the sum among the villagers on the basis of their economic standing. Second, the Chhattisgarh districts witnessed settlements that were to last twenty years. Finally, surplus or uncultivated wastelands were divided into two categories: unoccupied village lands designed to provide villagers with ample adjacent land to extend cultivation and, beyond that, the waste/forest lands. [5]

The efforts of British administration were directed at encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit among the landlords of the Central Provinces.[6] The belief that the grant of proprietary rights was the best way to encourage agricultural enterprise was accompanied by a keenness to bestow them upon the "responsible" members of society. These rights were now to be conferred in Chhattisgarh on *gaonthias* who had earlier collected the government land revenue. In 1861 the chief commissioner of Central Provinces stated: "Rightly or wrongly, the opinion has prevailed with our officers that an estate cannot be managed without a responsible head residing in or belonging to it; that the occupant cultivators must be dependent for support and guidance on a landlord and that for the state to collect the land tax from individual cultivators is objectionable."[7] The policy of the upper levels of provincial administration had privileged the position of *malguzars* by constituting them as improving landlords. At the same time, the agrarian characteristics of Chhattisgarh marked by *lakhabata* (the periodic redistribution of land) and the migratory nature of the agricultural population made the district officials in Raipur and Bilaspur wary of the grand design of the provincial administration.[8] The cautionary, even dissenting, voices of district administrators anticipated some of the difficulties that emerged after the establishment of new proprietary rights in Chhattisgarh. Yet the provincial government went ahead with its policies.

At the end of an inquiry instituted in each village between 1864 and 1867 in Chhattisgarh, the *gaonthias* were given a formal patent that conferred proprietorship. The *gaonthias* were now styled as *malguzars*. The *malguzars*' lands were divided into *seer* (home farm), over which they had complete control, and *khudkasht* (land broken from village waste), in which the tenants were offered some protection. The rest of the village land was held by cultivators. The tenure of holdings of these cultivators was also investigated and the settlements of the 1860s created three grades of tenants: absolute-occupancy tenants, conditional-occupancy tenants, and tenants-at-will. The rents of absolute-occupancy tenants were fixed by the settlement officer, normally for the duration of a settlement. The rents of conditional-occupancy tenants could be increased by the landlord at periodic intervals through an application to revenue courts. The rents of tenants-at-will could be enhanced almost at the wish of the landlord.[9] The details concerning the

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

distribution of land, revised rents, and particular customs in each village were now set down in a *wajib-ul-arz*, village administration paper. [10]

The effects of the graft of proprietary rights on an agrarian system characterized by a lack of fixed and inalienable rights in property, the institution of *lakhabata*, and the cultivators' tendency to migrate led to anomalies and anachronisms.[11] In the initial years the proprietary rights of the *malguzars* were not always understood and the *malguzari* status was not fully recognized.[12] The village headman, who had formerly only received a portion of the rental, had been transformed into a proprietor. The vast majority of peasants had been turned into tenants-at-will. The Commissioner of Chhattisgarh reported in 1868, "The consequences are now appearing, the people are reproachfully saying you have done everything for the Malguzars and made them Maliks [masters] and put us in a worse position than ever."[13] As we shall soon see, the *malguzars* came to understand and use the advantage of their privileges, position, and power.

Where were the Satnamis situated within the new agrarian structure established by the *malguzari* settlement? It is not easy to answer this question. The first difficulty stems from the problem of distinguishing the Satnamis from the rest of the Chamar population. The first census of Chhattisgarh was undertaken on 5 November 1866. The Chamars constituted a little less than a fifth—362,032 of 2,103,165—of the total population of Chhattisgarh. The census report added, "The Chamars of these provinces are almost confined to the country of Chhattisgarh. They in no way resemble the Chamars who are leather workers and dwellers of Northern India. Here the Chamars have thrown off Brahmanical influence, have set up a new creed, possess a high priest and priesthood of their own."[14] The statement, of course, indicates that the census did not distinguish between Satnamis and Chamars and assumed that all Chamars were members of the new sect. Two years later the settlement officer of Raipur commented,

> It is generally supposed that the names of the Satnamis and Chamars are synonymous but this is by no means the case, as the Satnami religion does not refuse to receive proselytes from any caste but as the Chamars form the majority of the sect and as no distinct laws of caste are admitted among its members, all incumbents of other castes become, in the eyes of the Hindoos, Chamars.[15]

At the same time, the colonial administrators—not unlike the local population—continued to use the terms *Chamar* and *Satnami* synonymously. It was only in 1891 that the census mentioned in passing that the Satnamis formed 88.5 percent of the total Chamar population of Raipur district, while in Bilaspur district this figure was 54.7 percent.[16] From 1901 the census enumerators started listing the Satnamis both under the heading of Chamars

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

(including subcastes) *and* under the heading of Satnamis. Over the next four decades there was no significant variation in the proportion of Satnamis to the total Chamar population in Chhattisgarh (see Appendix 2).

This does not, of course, allow us to establish the location of Satnamis as *malguzars*, occupancy tenants, tenants-at-will, and field laborers. Indeed, it is only on rare occasions that British administrators in their discussions of landlord-tenant relations mentioned the castes of *malguzars* and tenants. But a very rough estimate is possible. In Bilaspur in 1868, out of a total of 2241 villages, Brahmans owned 513, Banias and Marwaris 221, Rajputs 233, Marathas 46, Kurmis 207, Telis 85, and Chamars 156. [17] For Raipur, Crispin Bates has calculated the ownership of villages by different castes and tribes on the basis of the revised estimate of the second settlement (1885–89). Bates arrived at the estimates by aggregating the number of shareholders of different castes in relation to the total number of villages, since a single village could have several proprietors with rights divided according to a sixteen-anna share (one rupee was made up of sixteen annas). In Raipur in 1869, out of a total of 2097 villages, the caste breakdown of *malguzari* rights was as follows: Brahmans 380.8, Banias and Marwaris 172.5, Rajputs 145, Kurmis 182, Marathas 273.2, Telis 126.3, and Chamars 80.5.[18] It was, often, Brahmans, "Marathas" (meaning people originally belonging to the Maharashtra region, including Brahmans), Rajputs, Banias, and Marwaris who tended to be owners of entire villages. A large number of Satnami/Chamar *malguzars* may have held only a small share within the villages.[19] Indeed, the Satnamis, described as peasants dependent on the produce of their land, which they cultivated themselves, were primarily tenants-at-will.[20] The Satnamis and Chamars constituted a little over 25 percent of the tenant population in the *khalsa* of Chhattisgarh. A large proportion of the Satnami/Chamar population lived in a corridor running from the area between Raipur and Durg towns, north and eastward on each side of the Seonath River, to the eastern border of Raipur and Bilaspur districts.[21]

Even as the settlements were being finalized, the regional economy was rocked by the famine of 1868–69. The famine came at the end of a succession of poor harvests and dismal monsoons since 1864. The year of 1868–69 began with "very fair" prospects and the first fall of rain in June 1868 was "copious and universal." This raised expectations. Large areas of land were brought under cultivation. Almost all stocks of seed grain were expended. The grain traders sold off their surplus stocks. And then the monsoon failed. The prices of existing supplies of grain soared. There was acute scarcity in Chhattisgarh. The scarcity itself produced few deaths but a severe epidemic of cholera and other fevers led to a high rate of mortality estimated, conservatively, at ten thousand in Raipur district. Moreover, strains of a virulent disease among cows, bulls, and buffaloes combined with

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCOhost®

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

lack of fodder led to a significant loss of cattle, "completely ruining many agriculturists." [22] McEldowney has shown that the Central Provinces administration evolved a policy of famine relief only at the end of the century.[23] In 1868–69 the attempts of the administration were inept. The people suffered but stayed on in Chhattisgarh. The famine did not lead to migration.[24] The picture of distress was complete.

In this wider context, with administrators enforcing strict revenue collection, influential upper- and middle-caste *malguzars* bought villages cheaply. A total of 248 villages changed hands. Similarly, "the lower classes ... who had but lately been constituted [as] ryots [tenants] with certain status and rights of occupancy made over their patties to their Malguzars relinquishing all claims of any sort to right in the land and agreeing to remain in the village as mere tenants-at-will, in practice."[25] The upper-caste *malguzars* withheld customary aid to bring the cultivators to their knees and gain their *pattas*—papers that had constituted them as plot proprietors, occupancy tenants, and conditional-occupancy tenants.[26]

The *malguzars* were extending practices they had initiated well before the famine of 1868–69. In the years preceding the settlements the *malguzars* had deliberately encouraged *lakhabata* and the redistribution of land in order to prevent the accrual of occupancy rights.[27] The settlements had given enormous powers to *malguzars* over their tenants. The *malguzars* now invoked customary authority and selectively drew upon the British legal framework to acquire land and deny tenants their new occupancy rights.[28] In the year following the famine there were reports of tenants being forced en masse to resign their occupancy rights by *gaonthias* who refused them loans of grain and access to fallow lands. The Commissioner of Chhattisgarh commented that when the *malguzars* withheld assistance, "the inhabitants were at [their] mercy," and the *malguzars* became "masters of the situation."[29]

The administrators were indeed concerned about the situation. After the famine it was increasingly felt that tenant claims had been ignored. A shift in policy was inaugurated by George Campbell in 1868. It was ruled that the transfer of holdings no longer banned tenants from acquiring occupancy status, and now they were to acquire these rights retrospectively. Campbell believed that the cultivators had stronger claims on rights to land than the *malguzars*. He wanted to secure the principle that the occupancy status apply to persons rather than to land holdings. Campbell's concerns were taken over by later administrators, and a tenancy act passed in 1883 gave occupancy tenants the right to make improvements on their holdings along with a guarantee of compensation if they were ejected from a holding. Tenants-at-will were classified as "ordinary tenants" and given legal recognition. They could, however, still be ejected if their holding consisted

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

entirely of *sir* (nonfarm) land or if they refused an enhancement of their rents. The rents of the occupancy tenants were fixed at each settlement. In 1898 the act was extended and the settlement officers were given the responsibility of fixing the rents of all tenants. [30]

Did this reworking of policy and the new legislation bring about changes in the pattern of agrarian relations? McEldowney has shown that the attempt of George Campbell to protect and support peasant proprietors in the 1870s did not, in practice, benefit the vast majority of tenants in Chhattisgarh. The modified *malguzari* system could do little for occupancy and other tenants who had gone off to cultivate land outside their villages and even less for those tenants who had lost their holdings. In the period between 1868 and 1890, many *malguzars* in fact managed to retain control over their tenants in spite of protenant laws, because almost every law or procedure protecting tenants had a loophole or a clause the *malguzars* could use to their advantage. For example, the *malguzars* could not legally eject tenants except for rental arrears. At the same time, they allowed the rental arrears to accumulate and then, taking recourse to the law courts, ejected a tenant for nonpayment of rent. Similarly, the *malguzars* used their customary powers: they withheld assistance—for instance, in the form of seed grains over which they had a monopoly—from the tenants who continued to be dependent on them. Finally, they increased rents, collected illegal dues in the form of *nazrana* (premium and consent money), and exploited tenants by turning to the institution of *begar* (forced labor). British administrators were usually aware of these practices and sought to counter them, but the laws eventually enacted remained within the basic framework set up in the 1860s. A law that closed one loophole often opened another. The effort to run the proprietary settlement of the 1860s on a broader basis did not succeed. The changes in law did little more than offset the growth of subtenancy. The proportion of tenants with protected status—compared to those without it—was barely altered. Finally, the privileged position of the *malguzars* remained unchanged. The tightening of the administrative structure made for difficulties for the tenants, and the creation of the occupancy rights did not, of necessity, offer them protection.[31] We find then that the setting up and elaboration of the *malguzari* settlement—the initial British gift of new proprietary rights that strengthened the hand of *malguzars*, the response of *malguzars* to the famine of 1868–69, and their strategies in the face of protenant legislation and policies of administrators—worked to the disadvantage of the vast majority of Satnamis who were tenants. These Satnamis lost out mainly to Brahman, Marwari, and Kurmi *malguzars*.

And what of Satnami *malguzars*? Although a section of Satnami *malguzars* benefited from the processes that worked to the advantage of village proprietors, the transfer of villages that began during the famine of

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

1868–69 led to the expropriation of several among their ranks over the next four decades. Crispin Bates, on the basis of settlement reports and district gazetteers, estimated the pattern of village ownership by members of different castes and tribes. In Bilaspur the number of villages owned by Chamars and Satnamis declined from 156 in 1868 to 148 in 1881–90 and to 81 in 1910. In Raipur there was an increase in the number of villages owned by Chamars and Satnamis from 80.5 in 1869 to 92.5 in 1885–89 and then a decline to 79 in 1912. In the district of Durg, which was formed in 1902 out of parts of Bilaspur and Raipur, there were (somewhat curiously) no Chamars and Satnamis entered as *malguzars*. The main beneficiaries of these processes were Banias (traders) and Brahmans. The Banias, largely Marwaris who also functioned as moneylenders, increased their ownership of villages in Raipur from 172.5 in 1869 to 298 in 1885–90 to 483 in 1909, an increase all the more remarkable since in 1909 members of the group also owned 160 villages in Durg. The Brahmans increased their ownership of villages in the *khalsa* of Chhattisgarh from 893.8 in 1868–69 to 931.5 in 1885–90 to 1190 in 1909–10. [32] A number of Satnami villages were, moreover, in areas with poor soil.[33] Finally, villages owned by Satnami *malguzars* tended to be populated primarily by members of their community. The continued practice of *lakhabata* in these villages, I show below, attested to the solidarity of the Satnamis. Did this solidarity also perhaps set limits to the gains made by Satnami *malguzars* at the cost of cultivators of their own community?

Satnami *malguzars*, tenants, and agricultural laborers were agents and players in an underdeveloped regional economy. Crispin Bates has made a persuasive case that the rice zone of Chhattisgarh developed in a subordinate relationship to the cotton zone of Berar within the economy of Central Provinces. As Berar came to specialize in the production of cotton, a cash crop, it was fed by exports of rice from Chhattisgarh. The opening of railways between Nagpur and Raipur in 1888 made for more effective links and a closer relationship between the two agro-economic zones. The increase in the production of rice in Chhattisgarh occurred through *malguzars* and tenants bringing previously uncultivated land under the plough. There were few changes in the methods of cultivation. Earlier broadcast methods continued and improvements such as transplantation were discouraged by the widespread fragmentation of holdings. These unaltered techniques and patterns of cultivation came under pressure through surplus appropriation from above on a fragmented system of land distribution. The growth of trade in turn did little to alter the lopsided development of Chhattisgarh. The Chhattisgarhi cultivators received a relatively low price for their grain. The benefits of trade went to a small section of intermediary traders and merchants with a "trickle-down effect" that barely went beyond the top third of the agrarian population.[34]

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Some of the implications of this economic stasis for the Satnamis emerge in a brief account written in 1885 of the Satnami family of Manai who lived in the village of Padampur in Chhattisgarh. Manai's family consisted of his wife and his mother-in-law who was blind and could not work. Manai and his wife cultivated two and a half acres of land and supplemented their income through agricultural labor. They owned no cattle. Three days' labor entitled Manai to the loan of a plough and two bullocks for one day to work on his land. The family possessed no ornaments, owned only two brass pots, and lived in a small wattle and daub hut with two rooms. They survived on rice gruel for most of the year. Once or twice a month the family ate *bhat* (boiled rice). They spent less than fifteen rupees in a year on food and their annual expenditure, which included eight annas for the Satnami guru, did not exceed their income which, reckoned in money, was less than thirty rupees a year. Manai's family did not have any savings in cash but had kept some rice in store for difficult times. [35]

A rather fuller picture of Satnami "disabilities" emerges in an account written by the missionary Oscar Lohr around 1875. The low ritual status of the community meant that there were marked restrictions on clothes, ornaments, and accessories. Satnami men were not expected to wear a full-size *dhoti* and don a turban or appear in shoes before upper castes. Satnami women were denied a *saree* with a colored border and were not allowed silver and gold ornaments. An umbrella, fashioned as a distinctive cover of authority—arguably through a refiguring of the meanings of the *chhattra* (ornamental canopy) of rajas and gods that at once signified the divine attributes of royalty and the regal aspects of divinity—was reserved for use by upper castes. Forms of transport were also marks of status and rank within the caste order. It was in keeping with these cultural schemes that the Satnamis were forbidden from riding horses and elephants and using a palanquin during their weddings. Oscar Lohr was struck by the prohibitions imposed on the Satnamis in the domain of public space on account of their collective embodiment of the stigma of extreme pollution. The community was denied the services of the barber and the washerman. The group was also not permitted to participate in *melas* (fairs) and could not enter temples and the interior of public buildings. To the considerable chagrin of the indignant missionary, the Satnamis were not allowed to approach a provision store too closely and therefore could not examine merchandise before buying it. Finally, the institution of *begar* (unpaid labor rendered by tenants to their *malguzar*) led to the use of force by village proprietors, particularly during the busy season when the fields of the Satnamis needed attention. It virtually followed that landless Satnamis were kept as "serfs" and often worked for food and clothes, instead of being paid wages in cash.[36] The missionary's notes were governed by the need to expose the tyranny and oppression of

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

the caste system, which in turn revealed the liberating power of Christ. Almost certainly it would have been impossible to uniformly impose these various discriminatory practices. At the same time, the restrictions and disabilities listed in Lohr's rough-and-ready inventory constituted the principles of subordination of the Satnamis, which derived from an interplay between meanings imbued with power within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the culturally fashioned authority of dominant castes. [37]

What was the Satnami response to the adverse processes in the agrarian economy and their own subordination in village life? Until the late 1860s the Satnamis, along with other cultivators, persisted with the strategy of flight from the *malguzar* of their village. Such resistance to the increase in rents, denial of rights in land, and the collection of arbitrary dues also fed the authority of *malguzars*, who welcomed cultivators from another village and then encouraged *lakhabata* in order to prevent their own tenants from gaining occupancy rights.[38] Soon after the famine of 1868–69, settled agriculture increasingly became the norm since tenants could acquire occupancy rights even if they had been involved in *lakhabata*, so long as they had lived in their village for twelve years.[39] By the time of the revision of the settlement in the 1880s a settlement officer stated that *lakhabata* rarely took place.[40] But the Satnamis continued with the practice. In 1869 the settlement officer of Raipur drew a clear connection between *lakhabata* and the Satnamis: "Simga tahsil is the hot bed of lakhabata. The Satnami Chamar is found in much greater numbers in that tahsil than elsewhere and this is the caste which apparently is most in favor of its redistribution."[41] At about the same time the settlement officer of Bilaspur wrote: "It [*lakhabata*] now prevails more among Chamar villages than among any other class, arising I am inclined to think from their entertaining among themselves rather strongly a vague kind of idea that all men have equal rights."[42] In 1880 an official called *lakhabata* a "perfect example of village communism." Twenty years later the settlement officer of Durg echoed these sentiments and attested to the continued practice of *lakhabata* among the Satnamis: perfect equality was at once an essential characteristic of the lakhabata system and a cardinal principle and the true essence of Satnami faith.[43] In these assertions, the discovery of the "truth" about the Satnamis had played tricks with official memory. The administrators seemed to have forgotten the contradictory dimension of the practice of *lakhabata* in the hands of *malguzars*. At the same time, among the Satnamis *lakhabata* does appear to have been carried on as a relatively egalitarian measure that also underscored group solidarity. The settlement officer of Durg found that in villages in which *lakhabata* took place there was a uniformity in the rents paid by the cultivators.[44]

In the late nineteenth century the relations between Satnami tenants and upper-caste *malguzars* were extremely tense. The combination of loss of

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

land, discrimination in village life, and the effects of the famine years of 1896–1900 underlay the initiative of Satnami tenants against *malguzars* in the 1890s. They began a no-rent agitation and withheld rent from landlords. [45] The *malguzars* often disposed of Satnami tenants by fudging legal documents and through perjury. The Satnamis in turn looked upon civil court decrees as instruments of guile that were obtained by trickery. They cultivated the land and reaped the crops even after orders of ejection had been passed. When the *malguzars* did not give their tenants protection and assistance in time of need the Satnamis relied on moneylenders and learned to disregard the claims of *malguzars*.[46] The famine years of the 1890s, according to an administrator, saw the Satnamis at their worst: "To lie, steal, destroy cattle and commit arson are everyday affairs; whilst the bolder spirits indulged in burglaries, dacoities, and violent assaults."[47] In 1892 sixty Chamars, "a turbulent and lawless set," were arrested for rioting in Bilaspur district; in 1896 Chamars attacked a police officer investigating dacoities (armed robberies) once again in the same area; in 1898 a court official was attacked by the Chamars of Raipur when he went to seize cattle for the repayment of debts.[48] Almost twenty years earlier the census had reported, "When mortally wounded the Chamar would go to any length to injure an antagonist. His espirit de corps is worthy of praise, a Chamar will suffer considerable loss to do a good turn to a brother of the same fraternity."[49] It would not be mere conjecture to suggest that a majority of these so-called Chamars were actually Satnamis. In his discussion of the Satnamis Russell had stated:

> Over most of India the term Hindu is contrasted with Muhammadan but in Chhattisgarh to call a man Hindu conveys primarily that he is not a Chamar. ... A bitter and permanent antagonism exists between the two classes, and this the Chamar cultivators carry into their relation with their Hindu landlords by refusing to pay rent. The records of the criminal courts contain many cases arising from collisions between Chamars and Hindu, several of which have resulted in riot and murder.[50]

Colonial administrators, worried about the solidarity of the Satnami initiative, had retaliated with tough measures that included the stationing of punitive police in turbulent villages.[51] This solidarity was rooted in the institutions and practices of Satnampanth.

The Organization of Satnampanth

Satnampanth had been established by Ghasidas. His second son, Balakdas, took over after his death around 1850 (see Appendix 1). In Satnami myths

EBSCOhost®

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

and other oral accounts Ghasidas is remembered as an ascetic householder. Balakdas in turn is cast as a conqueror who elaborated the organizational hierarchy and the regulations of Satnampanth. The successive generations of gurus functioned within the structure established under father and son. We do not have the evidence to provide a consistent chronological account of the development and changes in the institutions of the sect. What follows then is a picture of the central features of the organization—practices, norms, divinities, and beliefs—of Satnampanth in the second half of the nineteenth century. [52]

The first *gaddi* (seat) of the gurus was established in Bhandar. Ghasidas had built a house and lived in the village during the last years of his life. The village, populated for the most part by Satnamis, also had Rawat, Kewat, Muslim, and Ghasia cultivators.[53] Under Balakdas the wealth of the guru's family increased. In the 1860s a colonial official mentioned Bhandar, the home of the guru, as the ritual center for the Satnamis in which members of the group made "suitable offerings" to the guru.[54] After the initiation of settlement operations and the grant of proprietary rights in the 1860s the guru became the owner-proprietor, the "sixteen-anna" (or sole) *malguzar*, of Bhandar. The development of a market in land and proprietary rights after the revenue settlements and the famine of 1868 prompted Balakdas's only son, Sahebdas, to buy the village of Telashi. Almost a decade later a dispute over the repayment of a debt between Sahebdas and his uncle Agardas led to a division of the *gaddi* of Satnami gurus. Sahebdas stayed on in Bhandar, while Agardas moved to Telashi.[55] Other members of the patrilineage of Ghasidas also went on to acquire proprietary rights in different villages. Bhandar remained the symbolic locus of power, the effective seat of the Satnami guru.

Satnamis had begun flocking to Bhandar after Ghasidas settled there. The injunctions against the propitiation of Hindu gods and goddesses meant that the guru, the only anthropomorphic icon, became the living symbol of worship and belief for the Satnamis. Balakdas inherited Bhandar as a sacred space of Satnami pilgrimage, where the *darshan* and *amrit* of the guru carried the substance of his authority. The second guru also elaborated the pattern. The reconstitution of sacred time in the Satnami ritual calendar was pressed further into the service of the gurus when Balakdas institutionalized the practice of an annual *puja* of the guru on *dashera*.[56] The calendrical event attracted Satnamis in ever larger numbers to the seat of the guru. It also invoked the curiosity of the missionary Oscar Lohr who wrote of a visit to the guru in Bhandar on the occasion in 1868.

> As I approached the village, I saw a great mass of people milling about and making their way toward me. Soon they had completely surrounded me. I tried

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

to address them, but found this impossible. Then in the midst of this crowd of three or four thousand people, I saw the Chief Priest coming toward me. [57]

The establishment of Bhandar as a focal site of Satnami pilgrimage over the nineteenth century defined its preeminence in the structure of beliefs and practices within Satnampanth.

A serious violation of norms and taboos could occasion a visit to Bhandar. The Deputy Superintendent of Police, Raipur, in the context of the famine of 1868–69 noted:

> Even Satnamee Chamars who by the precepts of their faith are forbidden to indulge in animal food thought nothing of stealing, killing and eating buffaloes and cows or even of devouring such as they found dead. They also indulged in Mussor [a red lentil] and certain Bhajees or spinaches [sic] which in times of greater plenty they had prided themselves in abstaining from, about which unorthodox practices when taunted by their neighbors, who rejoiced in the reformers breaking through their rules and observances, they would excuse themselves by saying that necessity had no laws and all that they would have to do would be to obtain absolution from the Gooru.[58]

Thus the guru at Bhandar provided the Satnamis, who had broken rules and transgressed norms, the way to reenter Satnampanth. A Satnami in turn had explained that to accept *amrit* from the guru in Bhandar was not to speak or work against him, and thereby to rigorously observe the rules of Satnampanth.[59]

A pilgrimage to Bhandar was not the only way of having *darshan* of the guru and obtaining *amrit*. The institution of *ramat*—initiated by Ghasidas and put on a sound organizational basis by Balakdas—meant that the gurus traveled every year to villages in different parts of Chhattisgarh. The Satnamis would come and touch the guru's feet, drink *amrit*, and make an offering to him. The guru in turn settled matters involving the violation and transgression of norms of the sect. *Ramat* embodied the elements of a spectacle—Balakdas had outraged the feelings of the upper castes by going on tour wearing the sacred thread (the mark of the twice born in caste society) and riding an elephant—and had become part of the established order of Satnampanth in the second half of the nineteenth century.[60] The census of 1881 complained that "the present guru spent his time managing his own temporal concerns, and in making a sort of progress (tours) through the country, receiving presents, offerings, and homage from all, but enlightening none."[61] In 1890 P.N. Bose reported that the guru "went on tour in great state, with elephants, camels" and a large retinue.[62] Russell writing at the time of the famine ten years later had felt that the subscriptions to the guru

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

had been significantly reduced. [63] The situation did not last very long and by the early twentieth century the gurus were again receiving large sums of money from the *bhandaris* in different villages.[64] The institution of *ramat* remained alive.

The offerings made by Satnamis on their pilgrimage to Bhandar and during *ramat* and the imposition and collection of fines from Satnamis who had erred provided the gurus with considerable wealth. Under Balakdas the appropriation of the sacred thread, which added to his bearing as the representative of *satnam*, and the simultaneous use of elephants and horses—the symbols of authority of the raja and dominant landholding groups—at once displayed the ascetic qualities of purity and truth and the regal attributes embodied by the guru. The acquisition of the proprietary rights of Bhandar and Telashi did not merely lead to a *malguzari* income. It also meant that aspects of the newly constituted authority of the *malguzar* as the controller of land and power came to be attached to the royal aspect of the Satnami guru. The missionary Oscar Lohr described the guru's house in Bhandar as "very extensive," built like a great temple without idols, and surrounded by an aura and abundance of wealth. The use of elephants, camels, and horses as modes of transport and the keeping of armament-bearing retainers reinforced this image.[65] The guru was both on par with and shared the attributes of a *raja-admi*, kingly person.[66]

A photograph from the late nineteenth century, taken by the missionary Julius Lohr, shows a Satnami guru with his retinue (see Figure 1).[67] The guru sits on a chair which resembles a throne in the center of the picture. He wears a *dhoti* of fine cloth, a short jacket of silk with a brocade collar, and sports a turban on his head and a large ring on the little finger of his right hand. The guru has taken off his shoes and his right foot rests on the right hand of a youth who is squatting on the ground with a *lota* (round vessel) in his left hand. The young Satnami is about to take *amrit* from the guru. The guru's retinue stands on his left and right, in front of and behind him. The retainers are dressed as soldiers and have a martial bearing. They are wearing turbans, jackets, a broad belt with what seems an official insignia on the buckle, loose white trousers and ornate shoes, and carry swords in their right hands. To the guru's right and left and immediately behind him are three men, the special body guards, who also bear a shield in their left hands. In front, on the left of the picture, stands a figure who looks like a *chaprasi* (peon). He wears a jacket, belt, and trousers but his turban seems smaller. He also holds a long stick rather than a sword in his right hand and, unlike the other retainers, he does not wear a scarf. The posed-for nature of the photograph underscores the twin aspects of the guru's authority: the provider of *amrit*; and the regal figure with his retinue of advisers, body guards, soldiers, and a peon.

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

Figure 1.
Satnami guru, circa 1898. Source: J. J. Lohr, Bilder aus
Chhattisgarh und den Central Provinzen Ostindiens (1899)

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250

It was Balakdas who had invested the guru *gaddi* with attributes of royalty. His successors elaborated the theme. According to colonial administrators, by the late nineteenth century the wealth of the gurus had declined, they had become indebted, and golden pinnacles that had adorned the house in Bhandar had been stolen. [68] Satnami myths explain this decline as a manifestation of the principle of disorder, but they do not divest the figure of the guru of his regal attributes.[69] It is not surprising then that Satnamis continue to refer to the guru's house in Bhandar as a kind of palace, which once had golden pinnacles on top, and to the guru as the bearer of the truth of *satnam*, who commands elephants, horses, and, indeed, motor cars.

The structure of authority of the gurus was further secured through marriage. A marriage in the guru family cemented alliances. Satnami myths and oral testimonies recount that the members of the guru family were invariably married into the families of substantial cultivators and *malguzars* within the community. Partappurin, for instance, who married the three sons of Ghasidas in succession, was the daughter of the *gaonthia* of Partappur. The affines were—or, like Partappurin's father, went on to become—important figures within the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth. This organizational structure extended from the gurus at the top to *mahants, diwans*, and, finally, down to the body guards and peons of the guru and *bhandaris* and *sathidars* in villages. Ghasidas had appointed *bhandaris*. Balakdas developed and formalized the structure. This was possibly refined even further by the later gurus.[70] Satnampanth had a firmly entrenched organizational hierarchy by the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century. A report from 1881 on "the religious leadership of the Satnamis" spoke of both the guru and his numerous lower representatives.[71] In 1890 P. N. Bose while reporting that the Satnami guru went on tour with "a large following" also added that the *bhandaris* collected what was due to the guru and represented him in "all social ceremonies."[72] Julius Lohr's photograph of a guru with his retinue of advisers, armed retainers, and a *chaprasi* confirms this picture.

We get a fuller description of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth that had developed over the nineteenth century in an account of Satnami religious practices written in the early twentieth century. A *mahant* regulated the community and upheld the norms of Satnampanth within defined territorial limits: the area under his control could range from five to a hundred villages. The *diwan* always accompanied the guru on *ramat* and was his adviser, while the *chaprasi* ran errands and did odd jobs for the guru. The *bhandari* was the representative of the guru in a village: he acted as a priest in life-cycle rituals and oversaw the feasts of the caste for the expiation of offenses. On these occasions he broke a coconut in the name of the guru and in return received eight annas or a rupee. The *sathidar* in a

Copyright © 1998. State University of New York Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 12/12/2014 7:36 AM via JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIV
AN: 7280 ; Dube, Saurabh.; Untouchable Pasts : Religion, Identity, and Power Among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950
Account: s1147250